WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

Central Washington Animal Agriculture Team

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STOCKPILING FORAGES

Jean Smith
WSU Area Extension Agent

Stockpiling refers to the practice of selecting certain pastures in the late summer where forages are saved or stockpiled for grazing at a later time. These pastures are then managed with the intent of using them late in the season for winter grazing. These stockpiled forages can extend the grazing season for several more months and reduce the amount of hay needed.

A major consideration in the selection of pastures to be stockpiled is the growth characteristics of the forage grass species. Certain cool season perennial forage grasses, such as Reed Canarygrass, are very sensitive to day length and night time temperatures. As days get shorter in early October, the plant ceases to grow and rapidly loses forage quality. Orchardgrass continues to develop in the fall, but shading and leaf diseases quickly degrade lower plant leaves. Perennial pasture grasses such as tall fescue, bromegrass, and ryegrass are forage grass species having characteristics that favor fall growth and development. Annual forages such as triticale, and rye can also be used effectively to offer extended grazing in the fall and winter on crop lands.

Endophyte-free tall fescue is perhaps the best perennial forage grass suited to stockpiling. Tall fescue produces a high yield of forage over a relatively short period of time, responding well and quickly to nitrogen fertilization. Tall fescue does not lose its leaves and can retain forage quality even under snow cover. It is a tough coarse leafed grass that is not as adversely affected by cold freezing temperatures as many other forages.

To stockpile cool season perennial forage grasses, animals should be removed from these pastures from mid-to-late August through late October. Fertilizing with 50 to 100 pounds per acre of actual nitrogen or use a more complete fertilizer, containing nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, will provide the nutrients necessary to maximize growth and development during this time period. Then begin strip grazing or rotating the livestock through small areas of the pasture in the fall after a hard frost.

There are many different ways of managing stockpiled forages to extend the length of the grazing season. Strip or limited grazing is one of the best ways of using these stockpiled forages because it forces animals to eat rather quickly while on the pasture. This allows for most efficient use of the forage, and reduces trampling losses in the grazing area.

Just as planning ahead is important for fall grazing, stockpiling will require advanced consideration of grazing plans for next spring. Keep in mind that by accumulating vegetative growth in the fall for stockpiling, it will reduce tiller formation because of competition for light. This may also cause poor winter survival under hard winter conditions, and slow recovery next spring on heavily grazed pastures. You also need to plan ahead and keep one or two pastures in reserve for early spring grazing to stagger the spring flush of grass and allow extra time for those late fall grazed pastures to recover. Those pastures grazed latest into the fall before dormancy, will be slowest to recover in the spring. Stockpiling forages for use later in the winter is practiced throughout much of the country. It is an effective way of reducing the purchase of costly supplemental winter feed.