



BEEF CATTLE TIME

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Spring 2004

Bermudagrass as a Beef Forage?

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In recent years, bermudagrass has attracted interest from Tennessee beef producers. There are several reasons for this. The first is it is productive during the summer and can provide forage during the summer slump for cow-calf operations based on tall fescue. Second, it can produce high yields. In addition, there is potential to produce high quality hay that can be marketed to horse owners.

If you are considering bermudagrass, keep the following points in mind.

Variety Selection. Be sure to use a variety that is adapted to Tennessee. Cold tolerance is critical for bermudagrass in our area. A variety used successfully in the Gulf South may not be able to survive our winters.

Site Selection. When deciding which field to plant to bermudagrass, select a site that will have good water supplying capacity during the summer. Bermudagrass will survive drought better than tall fescue, but it still requires moisture to produce during the summer. Select sites that have deep soils, like bottoms or ridge tops.

Fertility Requirements. It is widely known that bermudagrass requires large amounts of nitrogen for high yields. It is important to use soil testing to monitor the pH and potash levels. Bermudagrass removes large amounts of potash, and a couple of years of inadequate fertilization can result in severe deficiencies. Heavy nitrogen fertilization can result in a pH drop that is faster than has been experienced with tall fescue fields.

Planting Methods. There are two basic ways to plant bermudagrass. Since many varieties do not produce much viable seed, they must be established by transplanting vegetative material. Tifton 44 and Vaughn's No. 1 are examples. Depending on the variety, either sprigs or clippings are used as transplant material. Some varieties produce enough seed to make planting seed an option. Cheyenne and Wrangler are two examples. In either case, planting should occur in May

or early June to take advantage of early season rains. If seeded varieties are used, plant the seed no more than 1/4 inch deep. Take precautions to prevent placing the seed too deep.

Bermudagrass has a lot of potential for use in Tennessee beef cattle operations as a hay and grazing crop. It is more expensive to establish and manage than tall fescue, but it has a higher yield potential. If you are considering bermudagrass, contact your local Agricultural Extension Service agent to learn more about its use. Profitable use of bermudagrass depends on your being fully informed about its requirements.

Alternative Fly Control for Beef Cattle

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Face and horn flies are annual problems with beef cattle. The Tennessee fly season runs from April through September and could start earlier and extend into fall depending on the weather. Flies reproduce rapidly, which makes control difficult. Horn flies produce a new generation in about two weeks and face flies in eight to 10 days.

Horn flies are blood suckers, irritate cattle and interfere with feeding and resting. Each fly takes 20-30 blood meals a day. With an infestation of 1000 to 2000 flies per animal, each cow endures up to 60,000 bites per day.

Face flies also annoy cattle, interfere with feeding, cause excessive eye secretions and transmit pink eye, which results in reduced weight gain and milk production. USDA research reported that heavy infestation of flies resulted in cows losing about 0.5 pound of weight per day and a 20 percent reduction in milk production. The Tennessee beef industry annually loses millions of dollars due to these two pests. Here are some methods of control that work well in integrated programs. The types of insecticides used are pyrethroids, organophosphates, combinations, oral larvicides and avermectins.

Ear Tags. With stocker and cow-calf herds, most ear tags have controlled flies. Herds have consistently gained more per day compared with the non-tagged group. There are three kinds of ear tags: those impregnated with an organophosphate, those with a synthetic pyrethroid and those with both. Use a tag which has either a phosphate or a pyrethroid but not both. Flies tend to become resistant to an insecticide that is used for consecutive years. Therefore, alternating between the phosphates and pyrethroids is recommended. Producers should consider using the organophosphate tags for one to two years and alternating to a pyrethroid tag for one year. Since most ear tags are effective for only about five months, wait until at least May to put them in. They should be cut out at the end of the fly season.

Pour-On or Injectable Products. These help knock down flies and give some control early in the season.

Feed Additives. Rabon Oral Larvacide gives some control of horn, stable, face and house flies but works best on horn and stable flies in a pasture situation. It is usually used with other tactics, not alone. Another feed additive is IGR, an immature growth regulator, which is used mainly to control horn flies on pasture cattle. Again it should be used with other control measures. It does not control the adult.

Oilers, Sprays and Dusts. Cattle oilers are a good alternative but need to be checked at least weekly for recharging and adjusting. Sprays give a quick knock down and have some residual activity but should be used as a supplement to other control measures. Dust bags will give some control but require frequent management.

In summary, plan fly control early. Keep a record of annual fly control methods. Review what was used last year and how it worked. Remember, resistance develops when flies are exposed to an insecticide too early, at too low a dose or for too many years in a row. A combination of practices may be needed for control throughout the fly season. If tags are used and flies begin to build up in the peak fly season, supplemental treatments such as a spray or pour-on may be necessary to bring them under control. An oral larvicide or IGR mineral supplement may also be used to supplement control.

Constructively Cull Cows

*Warren Gill, Professor
Animal Science*

Continuous evaluation and culling improves both the performance of cows and, if managed correctly, may significantly increase the quality of cattle delivered to Tennessee markets while decreasing problems with downer cattle. All of these add value to both cows and calves.

Following are some suggestions to make this work, both for individual producers and for the industry.

Keep Records and Limit Calving Season. Two management practices – keeping records and establishing a limited calving season – facilitate constructive culling. Records provide information for making

decisions. Establishing a limited calving period allows producers to establish a program for regular evaluation, culling and marketing.

Set a Culling Rate. A typical culling rate is 15 to 20 percent each year. Natural factors, such as injury and disease, will typically lead to a 5 to 10 percent culling rate. Pregnancy status, performance, economics, and age and health of the cows will determine the rest.

Cull Open Cows. The golden rule of a good culling program is never over-winter an open cow! (Do unto her before she does unto you.) Wintering feed and management costs are the largest items in most cattle producers' budgets. The cow must have a calf to justify this expense.

Cull Problem Cows in a Timely Manner. Examine udder, legs, teeth, eyes and overall condition. Address problems when they first appear. Early culling may increase salvage value and can prevent serious problems. Cancer eye, for example, can be arrested if caught at an early stage but may result in an unsalvageable animal if not acted on early.

A cow with badly worn and missing teeth is likely to overwinter poorly and could die. Also, a cow with an udder that is "broken down" generally has experienced damage or deterioration of the suspensory ligaments and is unlikely to improve. Similarly, cows with distended (strutted) teats are unlikely to improve. Consider culling those cows.

Pay Close Attention to Older Cows. As cows age, they are more likely candidates for culling. One study of approximately 4600 cows of various ages calculated the expected future herd life of each age of cow. Table 1 shows that expected future life within the herd decreases greatly by age 10. Market value and performance also decline with age.

Table 1. Expected Herd Life for Cows at Each Age

Cow age, Years	Expected herd life, years
2	3.8
3	3.7
4	3.4
5	3.1
6	2.7
7	2.2
8	1.7
9	1.1
10	0.5

Greer, R. C., R. W. Whitman and R. R. Woodward. Montana State University

Older cows are the most likely to develop serious health and physical problems and are also major contributors to the downer cow problem. Another important reason to consider age is to avoid the common problem of having too many cows within a narrow age range. If, for example, you have a herd in which a significant percentage is over nine or ten years old, you may have to cull many of animals over a short period of time.

Cull Based on Performance. Since many cows are culled based on factors such as physical problems and pregnancy, sometimes little room is left for making culling decisions based on performance alone. This is why most of the genetic progress made in the herd is based on bull and heifer selection rather than culling poor performers, though cow culling is an important related factor. Performance criteria most often considered include calf gain, calf quality, calf birth date and temperament.

Record systems exist that are readily adapted for culling cows based on performance. Producers are encouraged to use these to develop the most accurate possible criteria upon which to build a culling program. Contact your local Agricultural Extension Service office for information on the FIRM.

Are Your Cattle-Handling Facilities In Good Shape?

*James B. Neel, Professor
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How safe are your cattle-handling facilities? Are they in the state of repair that will allow cattle to be worked easily and with reduced risk of injury to both you and your cattle?

Producers working cattle should be aware of the possibility of personal injury, especially if the facilities are not in good condition. Most cattle are normally calm; but when brought into an unfamiliar environment and frightened, they are capable of causing injury to the workers and themselves.

Mature cattle are heavy, strong and easily excited. Facilities that are in a poor condition or that are constructed of panels or gates not intended for working cattle are dangerous.

If there is a weak spot in facilities, brood cows will find it. If they detect "a give" in the facilities, they will quickly determine if they can break out. If facilities are in good repair and do not indicate a possible break out site, the cow(s) will settle down and can be worked.

With the USDA ruling regarding downer cows, an injury to an animal could result in either a severe discount or non-acceptance at local livestock markets — strong economic incentives for keeping handling facilities and equipment in good repair.

Before working cattle, check the facilities. Be sure they are safe and strong and the risk of injury is low. If needed, make repairs. Don't attempt to work cattle if facilities are not in good repair.

Looking to the Future

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Cattle Report Shows Decline in Numbers. The latest cattle inventory report, released in late January, showed the total U.S. inventory down 1 percent, beef cows down less than 1 percent and beef replacement

heifers down 2 percent from a year ago. These are signs that the cattle herd has not yet begun to increase despite five profitable years. Drought in various parts of the country reduced the size of herds, especially in the western states. For example cow numbers in Colorado are down 23 percent from January 2002. Other producers sold heifers in 2003 at excellent prices.

In Tennessee, the total inventory was down 3 percent. Beef cows were down 3,000 head or less than 1 percent. Steers and non replacement heifers over 500 pounds were down 40,000 head or 19 percent from a year ago. Tennesseans apparently recognized the good prices and also cleaned house as did Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia and Florida.

Planning for Fall Marketing. While many fall marketing decisions have already been made, it is not too late to perform management practices to add value to calves. The basics of castrating, dehorning and preventing pinkeye should keep price discounts at a minimum.

There are several programs available to market calves that have been double vaccinated for bovine respiratory disease (BRD) and in many cases weaned for a specified period and taught to eat and drink from a trough. While it might be simpler if all the programs in the state were the same, healthy competition makes it otherwise. Most of the programs are similar to the Southeast Pride program with some additions here and there. Check with your county Agricultural Extension Service agent if you have an interest in one of these programs. Several require vaccinations to start in early summer for September sales, so it is not a bit too early to be making plans for the program, sale date and place where you wish to market your calves.

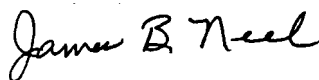
Keep in mind that while any market will sell your calves, markets that provide programs to make your calves part of a full 48,000 to 50,000 pound load can generate better returns. This might even require making the weight spread a little wider, mixing some breeds, or adding a few No. 2's with the No. 1 calves. If producers just show up with calves at a weekly sale day or even a regular graded sale where no other cattle may have had documented vaccinations or other special management, they should not expect a premium. This is because buyers are in the business of putting together loads of calves. The real way to capture the full value that has been added is to market using a method that makes the cattle all or part of a load.

In Tennessee so far success has been greatest in special sales for preconditioned calves or in video sales where multiple ownership groups are assembled. This requires commitment and cooperation among beef producers and marketing agencies. There are several successful sales of this kind in the state now: the Southeast Pride Plus sale at Sweetwater; Beef Advantage sales at several locations; video sales with the Lower Middle Tennessee Cattle Association managed by the Tennessee Livestock Producers and the Wilson Livestock Network; the preconditioned sales at Dickson, Lafayette and Cross

Plains; and there may be others. It can also happen at a weekly auction if the numbers are large enough to make a load. Buyers at weekly sales are asking which calves have had their shots. Someone should tell them before they have to ask.

Update on Beef Cattle Identification. As stated in the last two newsletters, the goal of the U.S. Animal Identification Plan (USAIP) is to be able to identify all the premises an animal has occupied within 48 hours of a need to do so. There are several bills in Congress to help fund this effort in fiscal year 2005, which begins October 1. The first goal is to assign all premises an identifying number by July 2004. All cattle in interstate commerce will be identified by July 2005. USDA has issued some guiding principles. There will be more educational meetings to explain the need for identification and trace-back ability. At this point, become informed.

Do not invest in expensive tags or scanning equipment yet, since specific requirements have not been set. Confidentiality will be an important part of the program. The plan is for the cost to be shared between the public and private sectors. Expect it to cost the beef producer something. If the system helps restore export markets and maybe gain some new ones, it should be worthwhile.



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From:

Leader/Agent

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