

GRAZING ALFALFA - COUNTY PERSPECTIVE

Monroe County Forage Program and Grazing Trials

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Often the difference between successful farming operations and others is the ability of the producers to manage the available resources to their advantage. The rolling topography and plentiful supply of livestock water in Monroe County is well suited to forage production. The purpose of this program is to introduce new forage species, improve forage production, and increase producer profits.

Several years ago a group composed of the Monroe County Extension Service, the Monroe County Conservation District, the Soil Conservation Service, the Monroe County Beef Cattle Association, and the Monroe County Food and Agriculture Council started a local program to introduce new methods of forage production and management with the hope of increasing forage yields and improving profits in livestock operations. Financial support to initiate this program was provided by TVA. Many educational meetings were held, forage variety trials were planted, three No-till Drills were purchased, and a grazing program was established.

During the past four years six cooperators have been involved in our grazing trials. These trials were designed to utilize most of the available forages and types of cattle used in our area. Forages included alfalfa, clovers, orchardgrass, and fescue in various combinations. Types of cattle include cows and calves, light and heavyweight feeder cattle, and Holstein heifers and others. Soil tests were used to determine fertilizer and lime requirements. Three of the four years of the grazing trials, plus the preceding year were all below normal in rainfall.

Interest in new methods of forage utilization prompted the start of these trials. Lack of grass due to dry weather and need for additional grass for increased cattle numbers were major factors in peaking this new interest. Our trials over the years indicate a wide variance in average daily gain and in production per acre due to different landowner goals and feeding programs.

We want to thank the many people who provided assistance to our group and the farmers participating in our program, a special thanks goes to the following who came to Monroe County to help:

- Mr. Glenn Johnson, SCS, Area Agronomist and Fencer
- Mr. Harold Vaught, KSU, Area Small Farms Specialist
- Dr. Monroe Rasnake, UK, Extension Agronomist
- Dr. Crutis Absher, UK, Asst. Director, CES for Agriculture
- Dr. Garry Lacefield, UK, Extension Agronomist
- Dr. Jimmy Henning, UK, Extension Agronomist
- Dr. Larry Turner, UK, Extension Agricultural Engineer

Over the past four years six producers and approximately 400 head of cattle have been involved in grazing demonstrations in Monroe County. These trials have involved straight grass, mixed grasses, grasses and legumes and alfalfa. By looking at each of these situations, I could not help but make a few comparisons. However, it must be stated that details connected to these trials are highly variable. This tends to make comparisons very tricky and should be done with caution. However one comparison tended to stand out, in 1992 one producer grazed twenty-four four- to five-hundred weight steers on 48 acres of straight fescue divided into three fields. Another producer intensively grazed sixteen five- to six-hundred weight steers on seven acres of alfalfa/grass divided into 12 small fields or paddocks. The fescue was grazed from April 12 to September 24 (154 days) or full season. Part of the spring growth of the alfalfa/grass was cut for hay and the rest was grazed by the producers' cow herd before the trial began. Three acres were harvested once again while trial was underway. This trial began on July 28 and ended on September 29 (63 days). The animals on the fescue trial gained 1.6 lb/hd/day and 116 lb/acre while fewer animals on fewer acres in a shorter time in the alfalfa/grass trial gained 1.6 lb/hd/day and 224 lb/acre. During the trial the steers on the fescue trial showed a gain of 0.75 lb/acre/day and the steers on the alfalfa/grass trial gained at the rate of 3.5 lb/acre/day. This difference would probably have been greater if the animals on the fescue had been held off till the spring growth was removed.

Keep in mind these are demonstrations with differing variables and should not be considered research. However, it does indicate what is possible when alfalfa is grazed.

Another example of the potential that exists for alfalfa as a grazing crop was exhibited in 1991. During a period from mid-April to mid-November, a gain of 1354 lb/acre was achieved on an alfalfa/ grass mixture. The potential for gain is present only requiring improved management to achieve it.

When considering the fences for grazing your alfalfa, it is my opinion that you have to have large paddocks subdivided with movable fences. Alfalfa can "get ahead" of you in the spring and you may have to harvest it for hay or silage. As for fence type, a strong perimeter fence, of course. In the interior, about any thing will do as long as it is "hot".

If this is your first experience with rotational grazing, perhaps the most important consideration is the location of the trial. This will require increased management so make the location easily accessible, put it near the house, somewhere you pass by several times a day. If your grazing area is at the end of the lane at the back of the farm, through 4 gates, chances for success are reduced.

We have tried grazing different alfalfa varieties in Monroe County. We have not seen an appreciable difference among the hay varieties as far as performance or persistence is concerned. In the last couple of years, we have had alfagraze in the trials, at this time it appears to be persisting somewhat better than the hay varieties. I do not feel we have looked at it enough locally to make that statement without reservation. All varieties have to be rotationally grazed to maintain the stand.

I feel the grazing of alfalfa is a great farm management tool. One of many to obtain optimum results from your operation. It can be turned to when dealing with older, thinner stands, times of drought and to reduce rented land by increasing your farms' carrying capacity.

All producers that are either running a few head of cattle or maintaining a large cattle operation on pasture are, whether willing to admit it or not, forage farmers. To extend the use of your grasslands will increase the need for improved forage management skills. To be successful at grazing alfalfa or grasses, serious attention must be given to the management of these resources.