

Best Management Practices for Fall Grazing Cover Crops

Benefits to cover crops following grain production is a proven tool to protect soil, reduce erosion, improve water quality and enhance soil quality. Fall grazing cover crops can also reduce feed costs but has challenges due to weather risk.

Eighteen producers who have fall grazed cover crops for two or more years were interviewed about their experiences. Their responses are summarized below.

Key Points

Planning

Plan ahead and have a backup plan in case Mother Nature does not cooperate

Flexibility

May need to adjust planting timing, choose shorter season hybrids, adapt to changing weather conditions when determining grazing options

“Just do it and don’t give up”

Beneficial in the long-term, but may vary year to year so start small and expand acres when ready



Predict feed supply – Plan to have adequate stored feed as a backup in case of bad weather. Weather is too risky to not have a backup feed supply.



Balance the diet – Cover crops are high in crude protein and compliment low quality forages.

Benefits of fall grazing cover crops

- Decreased feed costs**
- Minimized labor while cows are grazing compared to providing stored feed**
- Reduced volunteer corn the following year**
- Improved environment and soil quality**



Plan grazing rotation – Grazing grain residue with cover crop fields provides additional dry matter in the ration and a more consistent quality diet.



Start early – Graze when the forage is about 6 inches tall, or as soon as the forage is rooted enough to prevent pulling out when grazed.



Consider fencing – Cows or pairs can usually get by with less fencing, but good fences are needed if grazing feeder calves that may have less respect for fences and are new to a field.



Plan ahead – Consider which fields seeded to cover crops will best accommodate the herd for water sources, fencing and ease of cattle movement.

Agronomic



Aerial or broadcast seeding:

Seed into a standing crop based on crop maturity and rainfall pattern between August 15 and September 15.

Seed when the lower leaves have 'fired' up to the ear leaf in corn or when the leaves first begin to yellow in soybeans.

Not recommended for dry conditions.



Drilling: provides a more consistent stand, but delays seeding date.



Check pesticide labels for crop rotation and grazing restrictions.



Plant cover crop as early as possible.



Brassicas should be seeded before September 15 to optimize growth for grazing.



Remove livestock when conditions become wet or move to a sacrifice area.

Spring termination

Wait a few days after removing livestock and use an herbicide.



Seeding rates vary by seeding method and species



Higher rates if broadcast or aerial seeded



Lower rates if drilled



Spring cereal grains (oats, spring barely) provides more forage in the fall.

Summer annuals (millets, sorghums, sudangrass) compliment cover crops harvested for seed.

Winter cereal grains (winter wheat, triticale, cereal rye) provides more forage in the spring.

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