



Try to keep it green

When cattle can get most of what they need by grazing, life is good. Across North America, however, the grazing life is not so good in July and August. That's why the term "summer slump" was coined in fescue country, and affects a broad area.

Recent studies indicate cattle stunted by nutritional shortfalls on grass may catch up in weight when placed in a feedlot, but carcass quality may have been hopelessly compromised. As value-based marketing makes grade increasingly important, producers consider ways to maintain full quality potential for all their cattle.

There are two main types of grasses. Cool season, such as fescue, brome, ryegrass and intermediate wheatgrass, go dormant for the hottest months. Warm season grasses like bluestem, switchgrass and native mixtures, come on strong into summer but begin dropping in nutrient value after heading out in July. Legumes also grow more in the warm season.

To cope with summer slump for the long term, recognize and take stock of resources. If weeds or brush are robbing your pastures, make plans to control them before next year. Cows without or with poor calves could be sold now to make room for the productive herd.

If your pastures contain a balance of cool season and warm season or legume forages, you might ask, what slump? But if the cool- and warm-season pastures are separate, move the herd from cool to warm season areas as summer comes on. If you

have only cool season grasses, sequentially remove cattle to drylot feeding as the grass goes dormant.

Producers have successfully arranged paddocks around shady hubs, letting cattle into new grass early and late in the day, but allowing them to retreat to shade at midday. In less structured operations, gates remain open in July and August, letting cows and calves fend for themselves till it cools off.

Where fescue is the mainstay, many producers plowed under long-established stands to replace with endophyte-free seed 10 years ago. That helped summer forage consumption and conversion, but the stands were not as hardy. A new solution has emerged: novel endophyte fescue, which retains the turf-building attributes of the toxic endophyte, without the toxicity.

Consider tilling some cool season pastures for a conversion to improved varieties, annual relay mixtures such as oats or triticale and turnips, warm season perennials such as big bluestem or warm season annuals such as sudangrass, millet or even corn.

Corn may be too good for cows, but any grazing cattle must be restricted by fence to a limited area with a secondary backup so they can't run free range through the Cornbelt.

Legumes can bridge the gap, forming a successful counterpart in many cool season pastures. They produce more forage when the grass goes dormant, along with nitrogen for grass regrowth in the fall.

Alfalfa is a possibility for summer grazing, depending on resources. If the stand is lush, management must be intense and strip grazing works best. Don't try it without talking to somebody who has successfully done it.

Ranchers in arid regions turn the cowherd into dryland alfalfa in July and August for an hour or two per day, rather than go through the motions of mechanically harvesting what would be very light third and fourth cuttings. If range pastures recover in time, they still get a final cutting. Electric fence is used in some fields, but stock dogs have been known to end the grazing periods as well.

In taking stock of your cattle resources, you may see a way to retain ownership of calves as yearlings on grass. Some ranchers use that plan to apply heavier grazing pressure when grasses are growing rapidly, then move yearlings off to a feedlot and let the cowherd have more room in late summer.

Stockpiling is another option for some operations. If cool season grasses such as fescue are allowed to rest for 70 days starting in late July, you'll be rewarded with fall pastures suitable for weaned calves or winter grazing for cows.

The main concern for a cow-calf operator in late summer is to keep calves on a rising plane of nutrition without the cows losing too much weight. Creep feeding is a viable option, especially if you plan to retain ownership beyond weaning.

Creep grazing is another possibility if cow pastures are adjacent to a relatively small, high-quality paddock. If you have a bit more, but not enough for the cows, consider early weaning to let calves become stockers before fall.

In the next edition of *Black Ink*, we'll look at what the value-based market values. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717.

END