

## **Cool-season forage management decisions for stockers**

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The management and use of cool-season forages may provide an opportunity for improved economic return in stocker operations. However, careful consideration and understanding of plant-animal management strategies are needed for success. The following are a few tips and thoughts for grazing for success in your operation:

- 1) **Start with the big picture.** While average daily gain is certainly a key part of a forage-based stocker system, it is only one piece of the puzzle. Average daily gain, gain per acre, pasture stocking rate, and the length of the grazing season are all considerations that should be taken into account when deciding what forage system works best for your operation. If you are using cool-season forages as part of your plan, ask yourself what has worked best for you to maximize their use in a profitable way.
- 2) **Consider the incorporation of legumes.** In a summary of 37 grazing experiments conducted in Alabama, the seven studies with the lowest total pasture costs per pound of gain involved the addition of legumes. The authors concluded that both improved forage quality and reduction of the amount of nitrogen fertilizer needed in these systems lowered the total pasture costs per pound of gain as legumes were included in the grazing system. If you aren't already using legumes as part of your grazing management plan, maybe now is the time to think forward to next year as part of your stocker program.
- 3) **Grazing management.** The use of proper grazing management strategies can influence forage quantity, nutritive value, and ultimately animal performance in cool-season forage systems. Insure that pastures are well-established before beginning grazing. Grazing of most cool-season forage grasses used in the southeastern USA such as small grains, ryegrass, and tall fescue can occur when forages have reached 6 to 8 inches in height. It is important that these forages are not overgrazed in the spring, and should be maintained to at least a 2.5 to 3 inch stubble height. Forage height is also an important consideration as pastures recover from periods of cold weather. Allowing a recovery and regrowth period after times of extreme cold can help improve forage production during the spring.
- 4) **Additional considerations.** Using technologies such as ionophores can also help increase animal daily gains and may provide bloat prevention in grazed stocker systems. These can be delivered in mineral supplements or in hand-fed supplements. A common practice is to provide these in a free-choice mineral for cattle grazing high-quality cool-season pastures.