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The Fenceline

July 13, 2020

Is there anything out there for controlling Johnsongrass in my hayfield?

Matt Booher, Virginia Cooperative Extension

This is a common question this time of year. I'm sorry to disappoint, but there are still no good options for chemical control of Johnsongrass in cool-season grass hay. Some people report success using glyphosate and a weed wiper, which still doesn't take away the Johnsongrass carcass in your next cutting. And it seems that for each person with a success story there are two people who say the weed wiper dripped all over the place and left them with dead spots in the field. Some farmers have tried spraying '*Fusion*' or '*Outrider*' herbicides, but they are not labelled for use in hay and they can damage your desirable grass. I'm often told "*but that's what VDOT uses on the roadsides to kill Johnsongrass*." As Dr. Scott Haygood used to say when he was the weed specialist at Virginia Tech: the soil on the roadside is made up of 2 parts gravel and 1 part beer cans, and growing out of that is tall fescue...no one is complaining in that scenario if more than the Johnsongrass dies. So for now and the foreseeable future, I'm afraid we're going to have to find a way to live with Johnsongrass in our hay.

Christmas in July

Matt Booher, Virginia Cooperative Extension

If you're not doing so already, you'd better start thinking about Christmas soon--not in terms of celebration, but where your cows will be grazing come December. Those fields to be stockpiled for winter grazing will soon need to be grazed down or mowed to enable light to reach the young tillers that will give the best fall growth. Start planning for nitrogen to be applied sometime around late August or early September--around 50 pounds of N/acre is recommended.

Around 1 to 1.5 tons/acre of poultry litter should supply 50 lbs./acre of available nitrogen. Commercial fertilizer works as well; if it is still hot and dry when you apply, consider using ammonium sulfate (less conversion to ammonia) as your nitrogen source or add a nitrogen stabilizer to combat volatilization losses. You can also just bump up the rate of nitrogen or manure a little to account for losses during drought conditions. Whatever you do, don't wait so long trying to "catch it right before a good rain" that you fail to get the job done.

Lastly, give the gift of a longer grazing season to your livestock: buy a couple reels of temporary electric poly-wire and some step-in posts for cattle, or electric netting for sheep. They are easy to use, and rationing out your winter pasture in strips providing 2 or 3 days-worth of forage at a time will greatly lengthen the grazing season. I think your stock will appreciate the extra time on pasture and the superior forage that it provides over feeding hay.

Weaning Considerations for Fall-Born Calves

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There are many considerations for determining when to wean fall-born calves. Top of mind considerations are market prices, management preference, forage availability, and cow body condition score. The combination of these factors must be weighed to determine what is the most profitable system for each operation. Each year is different and can dramatically change the decision-making process; however, this year was especially challenging due to the unfolding impacts of COVID-19.

Cow body condition and energy balance are important factors to consider. It has been well documented that, in most years, with all other conditions held constant, fall-born calves will weigh less than spring-born calves when weaned at a similar age. Data from Virginia Tech and Virginia Department of Corrections research herds puts the difference by as much as 84 lbs. for 205 day adjusted weaning weights. This seasonal difference in calf weaning weights is hard to assign to any one factor; however, it may be indicative of the nutritional challenges placed on fall calving cows at peak lactation during the late-fall and winter when forage quality begins to decline.

In order to increase weaning weights, many producers with fall-calving herds wean fall calves at an older age. With the spring flush and abundant forage, cows generally recover body condition going into the fall. A 2002 analysis of 9 fall-calving operations in Virginia, reported an average weaning age of 8.2 months, roughly 50 days longer than the 205-day age used to standardize weaning weights. A 9-month age at weaning is also common. A study conducted by Oklahoma State, researchers evaluated age of weaning and its impact on the fertility of an Angus cow herd. They compared re-breeding percentages for cows in which calves were weaned in April relative to cows that had their calves weaned in July. Older cows, aged 4 and older, showed no detrimental effects in re-breeding percentage with calves weaned in July. However, they found a significant improvement in re-breeding percentage for younger cows weaned in April. Cows 2 and 3 years old that had their calves weaned

in April had a 98.4% pregnancy rate compared with those weaned in July which had an 89.3% pregnancy rate. This may be partially due to the improvement in cow body condition. Cows in the April-weaned group improved their body condition by 45% from April to July, compared to a 30% body condition gain by cows that had not yet weaned their calves. This resulted in the April-weaned group to have an additional 0.62 BCS by rebreeding.

Granted, weaning weights of April-weaned calves will be much lighter. Such calves could be marketed if the operation is short on forage or grazed ahead of their dams in a Leader-Follower grazing system that allows the weaned calves access to pastures first to graze the best grass, before being quickly rotated out to allow their dams to graze the residue left over. This system optimizes grazing management to allow cow body condition to recover while preserving the best forage for the growing calves. In the Oklahoma State study, calves from April-weaned operations weighed on average 31 lbs. lighter in July than July weaned calves. In other studies, calves from early weaned systems have had weaning weights similar to those of conventionally or late-weaned calves at time of weaning. However, in most of these studies, inputs such as concentrate rations were added to early-weaned systems to improve calf growth. The decision to feed early-weaned calves concentrates to add weight at marketing should be made on current feed and calf prices.

Another advantage of stratified weaning is to potentially reduce the risk from a respiratory challenge during weaning. Weaning fewer calves at a time may limit the impact of an outbreak of bovine respiratory disease. In addition, fenceline weaning has had a positive effect for many operations by reducing stress associated with weaning. Keeping calves and cows in adjacent pastures for 1 to 2 weeks greatly reduces stress on calves and improves their performance. Better still, when weaning fall-born calves, we have greater access to growing grass for weaned calves, compared to saving stockpiled grass to wean spring-born calves.

Though we are into the summer season, if you have any 2-year-old or 3-year-old cows, it may be worthwhile weaning them earlier than the mature cows, especially if they appear to be lower in body condition. Stratified weaning allows the maximum balance between optimizing weaning weights and reproduction. This is of upmost importance this year, with the great uncertainty in cattle markets this fall.

Sources: Selk, G. Comparing Weaning Dates for Fall Calving Cows, Oklahoma State Extension, 2016; Hudson, et al. Effect of weaning date (normal vs. late on performance of young and mature beef cows and their progeny in a fall calving system in the Southern Great Plains, JAS, 2010.; McKinnon, B. The Cattle Business – VA Cow Herd Performance Check-Up, VCE Livestock Update, 2002.

Questions? Feel free to contact me.

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