FORAGE MANAGEMENT

Forage Options for Late-Planted Acres

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Wet conditions in Minnesota this year has prompted many producers to consider late season forage on acres where they have been unable to get corn or soybean crops planted. In many instances, Prevent Plant (PP) Insurance has limited some of the secondary options producers might consider for those acres. Additionally, the window to seed forage species is closing quickly. Even though there are confounding factors in these situations, there are still forage options for producers to exercise under a variety of different circumstances.

When selecting a forage species that best fits your situation, there are several options:

*Brassica mixes*

Purple-top turnips, Graza radishes, Dwarf Essex rape, and Winfred brassica are all species that will germinate quickly, grow quickly, are relatively cold tolerant and produce a substantial amount of forage. They also make excellent mixes with cereal grain species like oats and barley. I don’t recommend using a summer annual in a mix like this because the summer annuals will die at first frost.

Seeding a brassica mix at 6 pounds (2 lb. Purple top turnip, 2 lb. Graza radish, 2 lb. rape or Winfred) to the acre makes a nice forage cocktail. You can vary that mixture as you please, that is just a baseline to start from. If your drill won’t handle really small seeds or low seeding rates, consider mixing a ½ bushel of a spring cereal like oats or barley to bulk up the seed mixture. Seeding depth should be about one inch.

Consider putting down at least 40 pounds of nitrogen per acre to boost production. Brassica mixes can be seeded until August 15th in the north and September 1 in the south, although yield will be reduced the later they are planted.

*Cereal grains*

Cereal grains are relatively cold tolerant so they work well in these situations. You can use most any cereal grain species and get along pretty well. Spring oats, barley and triticale will work well for this fall, especially in the north. In the south, producers can use the spring cereals but they also have the option of using winter cereals like rye or triticale; harvest the forage next spring; burn it down; and plant late-corn, forage sorghum for silage, or soybeans. Winter wheat varieties can be used as well, but the seed often is more expensive.

Forage production from cereal grains will respond to additional nitrogen applications, although they are generally good N scavengers so 30-50 lbs. of additional N maybe all that is needed for most fields. Seed 1 to 2 bushels per acre.
Annual ryegrass

Annual ryegrass is a fast growing, moderate yielding forage species. Typically, annual ryegrass is seeded at a rate of 30-50 pounds with 30-50 pounds of N per acre. Seeding should occur before August 15 in the north and September 1 in the south.

Annual ryegrass can work well as cover species for prevent plant situations; however, there are several limitations to be aware of before seeding:

1) Contrary to its name, annual ryegrass should actually be called winter annual ryegrass. If seeded in the fall, annual ryegrass will germinate, establish and over-winter with most of its yield potential recognized next spring and summer.

2) It is important to understand that the real strength of annual ryegrass is its ability to regrow quickly and produce really high quality forage. The yield potential of annual ryegrass is captured best through multiple smaller cuttings rather than one large cutting.

3) Because annual ryegrass over-winters, it will have to be burned down next spring before planting. Annual ryegrass is not hard to kill, but it often takes multiple burn-downs to completely eradicate it.

The characteristics of annual ryegrass may not be the best fit for a prevent plant situation.

Summer annuals

I would not encourage producers expecting to collect full PP payouts to consider summer annuals as a forage source for PP acres. These species have very little cold tolerance and weather rapidly in the field following frost.

For producers that are willing to take a reduction in PP payout to produce forage; the window for seeding summer annual species like forage sorghums, Piper sudangrass, sorghum-sudan hybrids, German millet, Pearl millet, and Japanese millet is almost closed. However, with proper management, they may still be an option for some producers, especially in the south.

North

Even if you elect to take reductions in PP payouts, it is nearly too late to plant the forage sorghums or sudangrass hybrids for the purpose of chopping silage. Most species are at least 60-day maturities so a producer would be cutting it pretty close trying to seed it now especially the further north you are.

The millet varieties may be an option for some producers that are willing to take a payout reduction. However, finding German-hay millet seed is mostly out of the question for this year and Pearl millet seed is expensive and in short supply. Producers may be able to find some Japanese millet seed, but will be mostly limited to haying.

South

As I said before, it is a pretty tight window, but producers in the southern one-third of Minnesota could (theoretically) get a summer annual crop to chop for silage. If not silage, producers should definitely get enough growth to make a good haylage, baleage, or dry-hay crop.

If producers do decide to seed forage sorghum, Piper sudangrass, or sudangrass hybrids; drill it today at 12-15 lbs. per acre on 14 inch spacing with 50 lbs. of N. If you have sorghum plates for your planter, seed 10-12 lbs. per acre on 20-30 inch rows. Seeding depth should be less than one inch.

Millet should be drilled at 15-18 lbs. with 50 lbs. of N; or seed 8-10 lbs. on 20-30 inch rows if you have plates for your planter. Seeding depth should be less than one inch.
Weed suppression?

Some producers may just want some vegetation cover on these types of acres to suppress weeds. They may not necessarily be interested in forage and don't want a bunch of tall, standing residual to contend with next spring. In this case, a brassica mix will meet this type of objective at a very reasonable cost.

If you would like to visit more about forage options; call me at 605-690-4974 or email emmousel@umn.edu.