

Managing Native Grass Forages

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Using Native Grasses in Grass Finished Beef

Over the past decade or more, there has been increased interest in grass finished beef and many producers have moved in that direction to take advantage of those markets. Can native grasses play a role in a grass-fed/finishing program?

One key to successful grass-fed operations is a consistent supply of high quality forage capable of producing acceptable rates of gain. This is important just to achieve desirable slaughter weights by target age. For instance, to end up with a 1,300 lb steer by 24 months of age requires an average rate of gain of 1.7 lb per day. Increased rates of gain are also important for quality grade and marbling.

Because of the high rates of gain provided by some native grass forages, especially big bluestem and indiangrass (2.0 – 2.2 pounds per day on weaned steers over the summer grazing season), they can be a useful tool in such operations. Switchgrass, which typically produces rates of gain on weaned steers of about 1.7 pounds per day, is another option. Eastern gamagrass, has produced gains of about 1.3 pounds per day, making it a less desirable option for grass fed beef. Clearly, other forages will be needed to provide such rates of gain at other times of year, but for the summer period, several native forages exceed target rates of gain.

Another advantage for natives is that they provide cheap gain, about \$0.40 per pound for big bluestem and indiangrass. Given the longer period required to grow grass-fed animals to target slaughter weights, there is a premium on cheap forages. Part of the low cost of natives is because they are perennials and do not require annual replanting. That fact, combined with their drought tolerance, makes them a reliable tool for summer grazing in grass-based operations.

I have often heard it said that animals finished on tall fescue may have an off-flavor. I am aware of only one published study, conducted at Mississippi State University that has compared animals grazed on native grasses to other species (in this case bermudagrass). In that study, animals that grazed indiangrass during the stocker phase had better quality grade. There was also a preference expressed in taste panels for the indiangrass meat. However, in this study, all animals were finished on tall fescue. Finishing animals on natives may have a greater impact on these factors.

While I do not know of any studies that have explored this idea, it strikes me that consumers in the grass-fed beef market could respond favorably to meat that could be marketed as finished on native grasses. It seems like an idea worth exploring. Of course, studies evaluating the impact on meat grade and flavor from finishing on species such as indiangrass and big bluestem will be the real test of that marketing approach.

In the meantime, native grasses can provide solid rates of summer gain at a low cost, two valuable contributions to grass-fed/finishing operations. For more information on native grass forages, see UT Extension publication series SP731 on line at <http://nativegrasses.utk.edu/publications/default.htm>.