

## **DON'T MAKE THIS TOO DIFFICULT**

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Spring is here, and pastures across our state will begin to grow quickly over the next few weeks. A lot of producers have gone to meetings, read articles, and looked online for practices to make their pastures more productive and require less effort. Sometimes information from one place might contradict something from another source. Or more likely they have found twenty things than need to be done this month, when they have time to do only two or three. Every one of the practices recommended are presented as the absolute most important thing ever, and you will be a failure if you don't do it.

How many things have to get done, and how do you know which are the most important? Who are you supposed to believe? Well of course, you should believe me. But here's the thing – it isn't because I am smarter than everybody else out there. If you have met me, you recognize that isn't the case. You should listen to me because I am a relative simple person, and I like to break things down to its most basic components. That has always been how I like to solve problems. Forage recommendations are the same way.

Some people may want to make forage production very complicated, and if you aren't smarter than everyone else in the room, you can't do it. Nothing could be further from the truth. Forage production is relatively straightforward, with several simple things you should look at over the next few months to become very productive and efficient.

**Step 1 – Soil sample your farm to determine your soil fertility status.** Sometimes the thing we think is the simplest step is the one we overlook the most. You need to determine if your soil pH is adequate, and if you have the appropriate level of phosphate and potash in the soil to support adequate forage growth. You don't have to soil sample every year, but try to sample at least every third year to follow fertility level. Fertilize and lime according to the test results.

**Step 2 – Evaluate the weed pressure in your fields.** There is still time to control cool-season weeds such as buttercup, plantains and musk thistle. Walk across your fields and see if the weed pressure is heavy enough to warrant and herbicide application. Contact your local Extension office for specific herbicide recommendations, which will depend on the weeds species present.

**Step 3 – Evaluate how good of a stand of tall fescue you have.** The next step is to see if your stand of tall fescue is thick enough, or do you need to increase your plant population. There isn't a shortcut on doing this. When your plants are about six inches tall, walk across the field and estimate what percentage of your ground is covered with tall fescue leaves. You are trying to capture 100 percent of the sunlight. If you are 70 percent or more, you have plenty of plants. If you are between 40 and 70 percent, you can graze or clip close in September and drill more seed. If you are less than 40, you will probably be better off killing the entire stand and totally replanting this fall.

**Step 4 – Use other species in addition to tall fescue.** You shouldn't depend on tall fescue alone for your forage production. You should add several species to your forage program to add

quality and lengthen your grazing season. You should have a consistent effort to add red and white clover to every acre of forage you have. You should also plan on adding some species of warm-season forage to your operation. This will provide grazing during the hotter summer months when tall fescue growth slows or stops.

**Step 5- Improve your grazing management.** If you are going to the trouble of growing the forage, then use it efficiently. Put up some temporary fences to force the cattle to eat all of the forage before you move them. This will also allow you the flexibility to move them before they overgraze the pasture. Start somewhere. It may only be dividing one field in half. But a trip starts with one step.

Nothing is very complicated about this process. Your goal is to have a long grazing season with minimal inputs. The hard part of this is to prioritize these recommendations and getting them done.