

WHAT KIND OF SUMMER WILL WE HAVE?

*Dr. Gary Bates, Director
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“I would be better at predicting the future if I knew what it was going to be.”

It is always challenging to write articles during this time of the year. Should I write about handling severe drought, or maybe using summer grasses to deal with short droughts? Poisonous plants, or maybe weed control. It is hard, because no one knows what the summer is going to be like, particularly a month or so ahead when I have to pen the article. Should I assume a summer like last year, when there was plenty of rainfall, or other years, when there was severe drought? It is probably best to assume there will be short periods of drought that become more frequent during the summer. Here are some things you want to pay attention to.

Watch for summer weeds and control as needed. As tall fescue pastures and hayfield become stressed by heat and reduced moisture, summer weeds will begin to germinate and grow. Don't let the plants become the dominant component of a field. Plants such as spiny pigweed, horsenettle and tall ironweed can reduce the palatability and ultimately the yield of a field. Get the weeds in your field identified and select the proper herbicide for control. Don't let these weeds get too far ahead of you before you do something about them.

Check for nitrates in summer plants during drought conditions. Drought often coupled with overfertilization with nitrogen can cause plants to take up more nitrogen than they can use for growth. This excess nitrogen is stored as nitrates. If a plant with high nitrates is grazed, it can be toxic to cattle. The same goes for hay that is cut from grass with high nitrates. If you suspect nitrates to be high, contact your local Extension office about methods to determine nitrate levels in forage crops.

Don't overgraze tall fescue pastures. Tall fescue is a cool-season grass, which means it is most adapted to cooler, moist conditions. High temperatures and the lack of moisture can be a large stress on tall fescue fields. If they are overgrazed during this period, the stress is increased dramatically. There are few things that will weaken a tall fescue stand faster than overgrazing during drought conditions. Try to let pastures rest and replenish root energy reserves prior to putting cattle back on them. It will help maintain the stand and minimize the replanting that needs to be done in the fall.

Forage test spring hay crops. Now would be a good time to forage test your spring hay cuttings. This will help you know the protein and energy content of what is going to get fed during the winter, and the need for any supplementations. There is no better time than the present to get this done. Otherwise you may forget before winter gets here.

Pay attention to these four points, and hopefully we can get through the summer with minimal problems.