

Livestock Utilization of Forage Crops

The Situation

Cover crops are an increasingly popular topic within the agricultural community, offering benefits for soil health, water conservation, ground cover, and more. But, cover crops come with additional costs, which producers are trying to recover by incorporating livestock grazing into their production systems. Feed costs remain the single highest cost of production for cow-calf producers. Utilizing cover crops for grazing is a natural fit for those looking to increase revenue from cover crops and decrease feed costs for livestock.

What We Did

A number of workshops and field days provided producers with information and research on the utilization of cover crops as forage for livestock during the 2017-18 programming year. Sixteen meetings across the state engaged 863 people in learning about multiple aspects of cover crops from management of animals during grazing to development of suitable cover crop mixes. In addition, numerous newsletter columns, radio interviews, and social media posts provided information to help more Kansans improve understanding of how cover crops could be integrated with livestock.

In addition to programming efforts, a number of applied research studies are in progress across the state to address questions related to cover crops. One example is a joint project with Colorado State University, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and six western Kansas producers to examine the impact of grazing on subsequent grain yield. Other studies are trying to better understand toxicities in specific cover crop species and palatability of different species within a cover crop.

Outcomes

- According to three surveys given post-meeting, 90% of attendees (n=60) reported they plan to make changes to their operations because of the information they received at the meetings. Changes producers indicated they would make ranged from planting cover crops to using cover crops on more acres to adjusting species selection to better fit livestock grazing.
- Responses (n=23) at one meeting indicated that 87% of attendees had moderate to significant changes in their understanding of the benefits of cover crops and 65% reported an increase in their understanding of how to integrate forages with livestock grazing



Figure 1. Attendees visit a local cover crop field during a field day focused on integrating crops and livestock in Cheyenne County.

- In two meetings, 38 out of 43 respondents said what they learned during the cover crop workshops was either valuable or very valuable for their operation. When asked about the most valuable things learned, one producer said, “to incorporate the cover crops and (graze) them.”

Success Story

Information was disseminated to other audiences, partly through local media. One member of the media who attended said, “information gained at the meeting will be useful in writing newspaper articles for the upcoming conservation edition of the local newspaper. Staff from the Natural Resources Conservation Service attended many of the meetings. This provided an opportunity to extend K-State Research and Extension knowledge and resources to an even broader audience.

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