

# Fully Utilizing Pastures Key to Maximizing Beef Profits

By Wayne Tankersley

Someone has wisely stated, “*the cheapest land you’ll ever buy is increasing the utilization of your own.*” But how does one do this? This article will explore strategies cattle producers can employ to increase productivity of existing pastures.

**Use improved forage varieties** - In the Southeast, we have three primary base forages – fescue, bermuda and bahia. In recent years, new higher yielding varieties of our base forages have been released that give greater animal performance. Extensive research has shown non-toxic Jesup MaxQ tall fescue provides significant improvement in stocker gains, calf weaning weights and animal health over toxic Ky 31 while offering the same plant persistence and hardiness. New varieties of hybrid bermuda like Russell and Tifton 85 are higher yielding and more digestible than earlier released varieties. Improved seeded bermuda varieties and blends such as Cheyenne II and Rancho Frio offer substantially more production than common bermuda. Among bahia varieties, Tifton 9 clearly offers production advantages.

**Add clover** - Research throughout the Southeast has shown significant increases in cattle gain when clover is added to permanent pastures. In addition, a good stand of clover (30-35% basal coverage) can provide 100 lbs/A or more nitrogen, thus reducing the need for purchased nitrogen fertilizer. The introduction of two new highly persistent clover varieties – Durana and Patriot – and the high cost of nitrogen fertilizer have combined to renew interest in clover utilization.

**Maintain soil fertility** - Soil pH is critical. Maximum plant uptake of the major nutrients N, P & K occurs when the soil pH is between 6.0 & 6.8. It should be noted that all nutrients are essential for optimizing plant growth and survival. Particular attention should be given to soil potassium levels. Low soil potassium levels can result in poor yields, increased disease susceptibility and higher plant mortality.

**Utilize proper grazing management** - In general, a good pasture will support one cow/calf pair per 1.5 to 2 acres. Studies across the U.S. have shown beef stocking rates can be increased 25%-35% when a “residue and rest” or “rotational grazing” system is utilized. An added benefit of such a grazing system is improved forage vigor, quality and persistence.

**Control weeds** - Weeds rob pasture forages of nutrients and moisture, provide unnecessary competition and lowers overall pasture quality and productivity. Weeds can be controlled mechanically or chemically. However, one of the cheapest and easiest ways to control weeds is to maintain a good stand of desirable grass. This is best accomplished by employing proper fertilization and grazing management practices.

**Overseed annuals.** Overseeding high quality winter annuals such as rye, wheat, oats and ryegrass on warm season perennial pastures extends pasture utilization into more months and reduces the need for purchased and/or stored winter feed supplies.

Beef producers who remain profitable in the future will be those that utilize management techniques that allow maximum utilization of every acre. Follow these strategies and begin maximizing the use of pastures on your farm.

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