

Hay It Or Graze It



There are several realities to consider before returning Conservation Reserve Program land to haying or grazing. Avoid hasty decisions. An evaluation of what's there is a first step in determining whether existing vegetation is suitable for haying and grazing.

Analysis of cost-benefit ratios for renovation is strongly urged. Other factors to evaluate include cost of fencing and water for livestock grazing and cost of haying equipment.

In some cases, costs may be minimal because the vegetative cover may be adequate as it is to begin grazing or hay harvesting. Or it may need minor improvements or management to upgrade it to acceptable conditions. In cases where grass stands are thin and legumes are to be included, use interseeding or "frost seeding" to introduce legumes without destroying existing grass.

Some fields may require major changes or renovation before the former CRP land can be used successfully for haying and grazing. For instance, where grass that is present is not necessarily the desired species, complete renovation, either with tillage or by no-till, may be the best and quickest way to return to the desired forage production.

Seeding Mixtures

The selection of grasses and legumes is influenced by factors such as average rainfall and drainage, erosion hazard, soil pH level, soil fertility level, intended use or uses of the stand, and length of stand life that fits your needs.

Different varieties are available for each type of grass or legume. A good variety should have top yield, have sufficient winter

hardiness for your location, and be resistant to the array of plant diseases present in your fields.

Mixtures of legumes and grasses often give the best overall performance for pasture and hay/pasture meadows. Yields tend to be greater with mixtures than with grass or legume alone. Mixtures of two or three well-chosen legumes or grasses usually are more desirable than mixtures which include five or six. Each selected grass or legume should have a specific purpose.

The method of renovation chosen depends on several factors:

- How much money and effort are you willing to spend?
- How long are you willing to take the field out of production?
- How long are you willing to wait to get good forage establishment.
- Do you want to use tillage and/or chemicals.

Many CRP fields are highly erosive. Where this is the case, there may be an advantage in using a non-selective herbicide in the fall before seeding, if it is necessary to start completely over.

No-till seeding or using the least amount of tillage necessary for operating the seeding equipment is suggested.

Rotate Grazing to Thicken Stands

Many grasses included in CRP seeding mixtures are considered palatable and generally are productive. But producers should be concerned about the endophytic fungus present in KY31 tall fescue, a

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commonly used grass on CRP land. The fungus is responsible for poor animal performance.

Some stands might not be as dense as a producer desires. Denseness can be achieved by applying nitrogen modestly for the first few years and by using proper grazing management.

Rotational grazing, when carefully managed through four to eight or more paddocks within a pasture, can be sufficient to improve the pasture. Well-managed rotational grazing permits sufficient “rest and recovery” time for the vegetation and provides a more uniform distribution of manure and urine to improve plant vigor and increase stand density.

In some cases, grazing allows legumes to “volunteer” in the pasture without additional seeding. But costs of fencing and transporting water to the paddocks need to be considered. For instance, a rule-of-thumb says a one-wire fence costs 10 cents a foot, two-wire 15 cents, and three-wire 20

cents. Water costs can be minimal to substantial.

Last but not least—are beef and hay prices worth the time, labor, and money of converting CRP land to haying and grazing?

Possibly, if you dedicate the management skills necessary to make the forage-livestock system productive.

Suggested Reading

CRP-4 ***Attack Weeds Early***

CRP-5 ***Scout for Potential Insect Problems***

CRP-6 ***Sample Soils Months Ahead***

1D-167 ***Maximizing the Value of Pasture for Horses*** (This bulletin also applies to beef.)

WS-9 ***Indiana Plants Poisonous to Livestock and Pets***

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