

## Managing Native Grass Forages

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### Cool-season Competition Control

Cool-season weeds present substantial competition for native grass forages. If left unchecked, they can weaken warm-season natives and eventually take over the stand. Cool-season grasses have a place in a forage program, but that place is not within the warm-season grass stand! One or the other will dominate and the other will suffer.

Where fertility levels are higher than what is needed for native grass forage production, this competition can be especially severe. Native grasses, with the exception of eastern gamagrass, do not use much fertilizer. Thus, the first step in reducing cool-season weed pressure is making sure that you are not over-fertilizing native grasses. Given current – and forecast – fertilizer prices, this is a good step regardless.

Another important consideration in reducing cool-season weed pressure is to ensure that native grasses are not stressed. Hay harvests that are too late (after Aug 25 or so), too frequent, or too short (<8 inch residual height), or overgrazing can all lead to stressed stands that are more vulnerable to weed encroachment. This applies to warm-season and cool-season weeds. If you are seeing unacceptable levels of weed pressure, evaluate your canopy management to be sure you are not stressing the stand.

Where cool-season weeds do need to be controlled, it can be relatively simple because native grasses are dormant following frost in the fall. Thus, once the natives are dormant, broad spectrum herbicides can be used. For perennials, such as tall fescue and orchardgrass, use of glyphosate can be very effective during the fall. Spray once the natives are dormant but while the cool-season grasses are still actively growing – typically in November. In fact, this is the best time of year to control these species as far as effective and spray rates are concerned.

Broadleaf biennial and perennial weeds such as thistles and plantains can also be effectively controlled during late fall with 2,4-D or metsulfuron formulations. Winter annuals can also be controlled at this time of year or in March. For annuals, the broadleaf herbicides mentioned above can be used as can glyphosate. Burndown chemicals such as gramoxone can also be effective on annuals. Please keep in mind though, there is a 60-day restriction for grazing with gramoxone, so timing is important.

Another tool widely used in the Great Plains to control weeds in native grass stands is prescribed fire. Burning native grasses in late March or early April can be effective at removing annuals and suppressing perennials. Neither tall fescue nor orchardgrass will be killed by burning though. In fact, burning too early (before late March) can actually enhance these competitor's position in the stand.

Good management is the first step to reducing cool-season weed problems in native grasses. But winter dormancy provides a good opportunity to eliminate these weeds when they have become a problem. Left uncontrolled, they can weaken a native grass stand and reduce its vigor and production.