

Managing Native Grass Forages

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How Much Warm-season Grass Do I Need?

In considering planting native warm-season forages on your farm, one of the most basic questions is, “how much do I need?” Certainly having good quality summer forage is important in any beef operation and natives can play that role well – drought tolerant, low input, and good yields of excellent forage. But how many acres should you plant? There are really two answers to that question.

First, is the short-term answer. If you have never planted native grasses, it would be best to start relatively small, maybe 3 – 5 acres. Select an area that is already in need of renovation, or perhaps an odd area that has been out of production for a while. Starting at a modest scale and (perhaps) on marginal land reduces risk by having a minimal area out of production and limits exposure in case drought or other issues impact establishment success. Once you have established this smaller area, you can gain some experience in managing these grasses and from there, decide how much more you would like to plant. You will also have some experience in establishment and some of the associated challenges.

In the long-term, having 25 – 50% summer forages is a good goal. This figure is based on two things. First, because native warm-season grasses (NWSG) produce so much more tonnage per acre (about 4 vs. about 2.5 for cool-season grasses), and require fewer inputs, they can produce hay more cheaply and on fewer acres. They also have the advantage of being harvested later in the summer when haymaking weather is better and other farm chores may not be as pressing. Thus, there is good justification for having all of your hay ground in NWSG.

What about pasture? A good way to look at that is to recognize that we have, optimistically, ten months of grazing, four of which are not typically good for producing cool-season forages. Based on simple math then, four of ten grazing months, or 40% of pastures could be reasonably put into summer forages. Past research conducted in northern Virginia suggested a target of 30% summer forages. Recommendations farther south (Arkansas, for example) put the figure at or above 50%. Clearly, how far south you are plays a role in determining the appropriate ratio between cool- and warm-season forages.

Regardless of what target you shoot for, it will be prudent to work towards that goal in modest increments. So if you think you may want, say 50 acres of NWSG on a farm with 120 acres of grass, it may be best to convert 5 acres initially, and the rest over 3 – 5 years in 10 or 15-acre increments. As mentioned above, this will spread out risk and allow you to make adjustments as you go. It will also help on cash flow in terms of establishment expenses.

Regardless of your ultimate goal, consider using NWSG the next time you renovate a pasture or hayfield. This will give you a good opportunity to evaluate how they fit into your forage program.