

Managing Native Grass Forages

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Why Use Native Warm-season Grasses? Stockering and Backgrounding

I have provided a number of tips and pointers on how to best establish and manage native grass forages over the past two years in this space. I want to switch gears and talk about why we might want to consider using native grasses in a forage program. Although there are many reasons to consider using native grasses, I want to focus on their role in a stockering and/or backgrounding program.

Although the preponderance of fescue-belt producers have spring calving herds, there are many that have herds that calve in the fall. Those fall born calves are typically weaned in mid-spring, perhaps early May. The starting point of this grazing period corresponds very well to typical weaning dates for fall-born calves. At that point, producers have an excellent opportunity to capture additional weight on these animals before marketing them.

Such backgrounding can be readily achieved with native grasses. Studies at University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture (UTIA) in recent years indicate that for the 112-day summer grazing season (early May – late August), native grasses can average rates of gain of 1.75 – 2.12 lb per day on weaned steers (590 lb starting weight). The lower figures are based on switchgrass and the higher number from indiangrass and big bluestem. Eastern gamagrass has not produced gains above 1.65 lb per day for steers and is not as desirable of a forage for stockering/backgrounding for that reason.

Based on the data from these grazing studies, economists at UTIA have evaluated the trade-off in holding these steers on native grass pastures versus marketing them after weaning in May. Because the rate of gain is high and the cost of grazing is low (approximately \$0.31-0.37 per lb of gain) with natives, net returns are positive. This is despite reduced per unit prices for the larger steers (about 825 lb in late August) and the typical declines in late summer markets. Producers could sell the stockers at any point in the summer depending on markets. Early-season rates of gain with natives are higher still (2.2 – 2.7 lb per day) and producers could still experience favorable returns in selling calves after only 45 or 60 days of grazing natives. For instance, selling the calves in late July or early August (about 84 days) would capture most of the gain off the native pastures and would avoid declining markets in late August/September.

Because these native grasses are perennials, they are reliably available each spring and summer. Furthermore, because of their high drought tolerance, producers could count on forage even in dry summers. Of course, stocking rates or duration may need to be reduced, depending on the severity and duration of the drought. The low cost of grazing and maintaining these summer forages combined with the high rates of gain they produce make them a good investment for producers interested in summer stockering and/or backgrounding. For more information see *Grazing Native Warm-season Grasses in the Mid-South* (SP731-C) and *Economic Implications of Growing Native Warm-season Grasses for Forage in the Mid-South* (SP731-E) at extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Pages/default.aspx.