

Avoid Typical Pitfalls When Making Late-Season Forage-Management Decisions

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Late-season extended grazing does not universally reduce feed costs for beef cattle in the Northern Plains. The common belief that extended grazing has lower costs is based on several seemingly logical assumptions that are simplifications of complex situations. Evaluation of costs for late-season forage is complicated. The various forage types and management practices have complex differences in their production costs per acre, plant growth stages at time of grazing or haying, quantity of forage harvested per acre, and weight of nutrients captured per acre. These differences influence feed costs and make comparing late-season forages and management practices as difficult as comparing apples and oranges. The costs of forage from different treatments, however, can be compared equitably if the cost per pound of nutrient captured, cost per pound of accumulated livestock weight, or animal feed costs per day are determined through systematic methods and are evaluated objectively. An impartial comparison of factual cost information is required to separate the treatments that truly reduce feed costs from the treatments that only appear to reduce feed costs.

Problems develop when cost comparisons of late-season forage practices are not systematic evaluations but are rapid judgements based on simplified assumptions and little or no actual cost data. Simplified assumptions may be true under some general conditions, but they are not true for all situations. A simplified understanding of a complex situation does not simplify that situation. Incorrect conclusions can result when management decisions for late-season forage treatments are made with limited quantitative cost data and based on one or more of the following simplified assumptions:

- the assumption that reducing costs increases profits,
- the assumption that reducing labor reduces costs,
- the assumption that lower cash paid out is the same as lower costs,
- the assumption that livestock weight sold at the marketplace is the source of economic income,
- the assumption that forage management decisions should be made from the perspective of livestock husbandry,
- the assumption that treating the symptom of a problem is as good as correcting the cause of the problem,
- the assumption that grazing perennial plants after frost does not damage the plants,
- the assumption that dormant-season grazing does not cause detrimental effects to biogeochemical processes and nutrient flow in ecosystems,
- the assumption that harvested forages have greater costs than pasture forages,
- the assumption that dormant pasture forage could be evaluated as if it were unharvested standing hay,
- the assumption that supplementation to supply nutrients deficient in pasture dry matter is lower cost than providing forage that meets livestock dietary requirements, and
- the assumption that having cattle graze their own forage from dormant perennial plants is lower cost than feeding hay.

Management decisions that are made from objective evaluations of costs for late-season forage and that are based on systematic comparisons of quantitative information rather than on simplified assumptions and scant cost data will avoid the pitfalls typically experienced when choices for late-season forage treatments are made.