

Extension Workgroup

Bermudagrass Production Schools for Tennessee Producers

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Horses have become a large industry in Tennessee. The Agricultural Statistics Service now ranks Tennessee second in the nation in equine numbers. In response to this, horse hay market has grown dramatically. Many dairy, beef, and tobacco producers have decided to produce hay for this market. These producers had experience in hay production, but mostly with cool-season grasses such as tall fescue and orchardgrass. Due to weather conditions in the spring, the first cutting of these grasses can be delayed or rained on, making it difficult to market to horse owners. Many producers are interested in utilizing bermudagrass as one of the primary species for horse hay. Several agronomic characteristics of bermudagrass result in different management requirements compared to tall fescue or orchardgrass.

Production problems experienced by producers

As more and more acres of bermudagrass began to be planted across the state, a few simple but common problems seemed to consistently develop. The first problem was in the area of soil fertility. Most of these hay producers were aware of the high nitrogen requirements for bermudagrass hay production. However they continued to apply phosphate, potash and lime according to their experience with cool-season grasses. Low pH and/or potash levels soon developed on many of these farms. The problems were caused by the lack of experience in bermudagrass production by Tennessee producers.

With more producers beginning to investigate bermudagrass as a cash crop, several new varieties were being publicized across the southeast. There were constant inquiries from Extension agents and producers concerning specific varieties that were mentioned in various news outlets. Because of the climate within the state, variety selection is one of the more critical decisions that can be made by a bermudagrass producer. Selecting a variety without the proper level of cold tolerance can limit the stand life to one year.

Aiding producers through education

An educational campaign was initiated to teach producers in an intensive program the proper techniques to establish and maintain bermudagrass. Since the majority of these producers farm part-time, the program has been designed to be conducted during three evening sessions

Night one - Establishment year decisions (variety selection, weed control, fertilization, etc.).

Night two - Management of bermudagrass during year two and beyond (weed control, fertilization, harvest, overseeding, etc.).

Night three - visit newly established field of bermudagrass - discuss soil, forage testing, weed control, etc.

Class size has been limited to 30-35 producers. This has encouraged discussion among producers, and questions concerning misunderstanding and misconceptions with bermudagrass production.

Evaluation of program

As of this year, over 120 producers have been through these bermudagrass hay production schools. Evaluations returned via mail indicated that over 90 percent of the participants felt better able to produce bermudagrass after attending this educational opportunity. One-hundred percent of the participants indicated that they were going to change some portion of their bermudagrass production program based on the topics taught in the school.