W1335

Repairing Hay Feeding Areas

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As winter fades and temperatures rise, it's a good time to assess and repair hay-feeding areas.

Heavy traffic and winter feeding often leave pastures with bare patches of soil. If no action is taken, these areas can quickly become hotspots for weeds and erosion. Often, overseeding tall fescue in the spring has limited success due to its slow establishment. In such cases, using quick-establishing forages is essential.

March is a great time to smooth and reseed these areas as well as other heavy traffic zones while also thinking ahead about pasture utilization strategies, such as fencing, water access and shade. Light work to level out tractor tracks and smooth the ground can help prevent issues. Running a cultipacker afterward can improve soil-seed contact and establish a firm seedbed, which enhances seed germination and accelerates establishment.

Early Seeding for Spring Grazing

If timing allows, these areas can be reseeded with oats or annual ryegrass in March. The optimal seeding window for these forages is from February 20 to April 1. Seeding rates and depth are important as well. Oats should be seeded at 100 to 150 lbs per acre at a depth of 1 to 2 inches, and annual ryegrass requires 20 to 30 lbs per acre and no deeper than ½ inch. For more information on seeding, reference UT Extension Publication PB378 Forage and Field Crop Seeding Guide For Tennessee.

After cool-season forages, it's important to follow up by seeding a summer annual like crabgrass in late May to maintain forage production.

Seeding Summer Annuals

If it's too late to plant cool-season forages, summer annuals can be a great option for reseeding. Crabgrass is an excellent choice, particularly as we experience longer and hotter summers. Crabgrass is a prolific summer annual forage crop that can offer excellent quality and quantity for grazing or hay production. When managed properly, crabgrass also can reseed itself in the field. Crabgrass is most productive from June to September in Tennessee.

To establish crabgrass in hay feeding areas, the same basic ground preparation mentioned earlier applies. The recommended seeding rate is 3 to 5 lbs per acre of pure live seed. Drilling the seed is always more efficient than broadcasting because it ensures better soil-seed contact. If drilling, use the lower end of the seeding rate range. However, paying close attention to seed depth is crucial. Deep seeding can be a problem, especially if the ground has been worked. If broadcasting, plan to use more seed since some will inevitably fail to make soil contact and won't germinate. For more information on crabgrass varieties, including yield and nutritive value, reference Forage Variety Trials on the UT Beef and Forage Center website.

Reseeding Perennial Grasses

Fall seeding of perennial grasses is an excellent opportunity to improve forage production as the grazing season winds down. For instance, tall fescue can be seeded from August 15 to November 1 at a rate of 15 to 20 lbs per acre at a depth of ¼ to ½ inch.

Key Takeaways

Following these guidelines will help restore damaged areas, improve forage availability, reduce erosion, and weed pressure in Tennessee pastures. Whether you choose cool-season forages like oats and ryegrass or summer annuals like crabgrass, investing in pasture recovery will pay off. It is important to mention that the more concentrated the hay feeding area, the more intense the heavy-use area will become. A more distributed hay feeding strategy, combined with well-managed pastures, enhances productivity and resilience. Let's set the stage for a great grazing season ahead.

Steps to Success

1. **The problem:** Identify hay-feeding areas damaged during the winter months where bare soil is exposed.
2. **Prepare ground to seed:** After hay feeding has concluded, lightly disk the area to remove ruts or uneven spots caused by heavy traffic.
3. **Create a firm seedbed:** Smooth the soil with a cultipacker or similar implement to create a smooth, firm seedbed; a small seed will not germinate well if planted deeper than ½ inch
4. **Seeding recommendations** (in lbs/acre of pure live seed):
    a. Early spring: Sow oats at a rate of 100 to 150 lbs/acre, or annual ryegrass at 20 to 30 lbs/acre
    b. Late spring/summer: Sow crabgrass at a rate of 3-5 lbs/acre. Use 3 lbs if using a no-till drill, and 5 lbs if broadcasting.
5. **Ensure even distribution:** If broadcasting, mix the seed with a carrier, such as pelletized lime or play sand, to help distribute the seeds evenly. Do not use construction sand as a carrier. Adding a small amount of water with sand will help the seed stick to the carrier for better coverage.
6. **Changing hay feeding strategy to prevent:** It's important to note that the more concentrated the hay feeding area, the more intense the problem. When hay is fed in the same spot repeatedly, it leads to soil compaction, reduced grass cover and potential nutrient concentration in that area. By spreading out hay feeding across different areas, these negative impacts can be minimized. A strategic, rotational approach to hay feeding not only protects the pastures but also promotes healthier, more sustainable grazing systems in the long run.

Figure 1: *Prepped seedbed ready for planting*

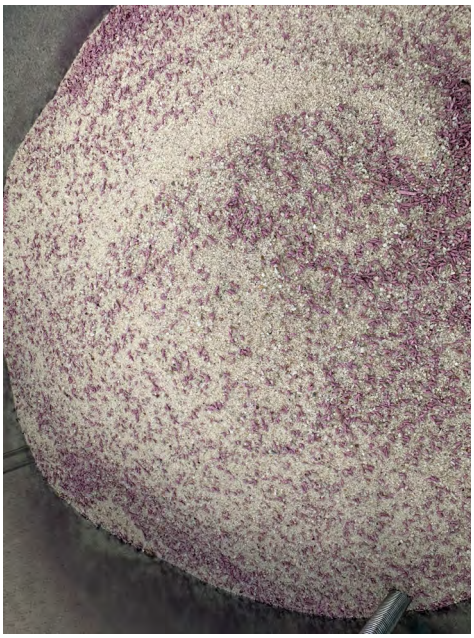

Figure 2: *Seed mixed with play sand for broadcast seeding*

Figure 3: *Stand of Mojo crabgrass 8 weeks post-planting*

Oats Technical Specs: **Seeding Rate: 100-150 lbs/acre (drilled or broadcast)** **Seeding Depth: ¼ - ½ inch** **Planting Time: Feb 20 – April 1** **Production Time: March – April**	**Crabgrass Technical Specs:** **Seeding Rate: 3-5 lbs/acre (drilled or broadcast)** **Seeding Depth: ¼ - ½ inch** **Planting Time: May – June** **Production Time: June – September**
Annual Ryegrass Technical Specs: **Seeding Rate: 20-30 lbs/acre (drilled or broadcast)** **Seeding Depth: 1- 2 inches** **Planting Time: Feb 20 – April 1** **Production Time: March – April**	**Tall Fescue Technical Specs:** **Seeding Rate: 15-20 lbs/acre (drilled or broadcast)** **Seeding Depth: ¼ - ½ inch** **Planting Time: August 15 – October 1** **Production Time: March – May, and Sept – November**

Online Resources

UT Extension Publication PB378 Forage and Field Crop Seeding Guide for Tennessee: tiny.utk.edu/SG

Forage Variety Trials (crabgrass varieties, including yield and nutritive value): utbeef.tennessee.edu/forages-tennessee-variety-trials/

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