For those ranchers who can afford to fertilize pastures this year now is the time to start planning. What should you fertilize, and when and how much should be applied?

In deciding what to fertilize, priority should be given to fertilizing the better quality forages such as hemarthria, pangolagrass, and stargrass. Priority should be given to fertilizing those pastures that will be grazed by younger cattle, especially first-calf heifers.

Of course, bahiagrass is the major pasture forage in Florida. The South Florida Beef/Forage Extension Agents conducted a excellent field study on 9 ranches in south Florida to measure the benefits of different fertilizer applications. They found that bahiagrass showed a good response to nitrogen fertilization, but little response to phosphorus and potassium. The most economical fertilizer application was to spread 60 pounds of nitrogen per acre in March.

When nitrogen was applied in March there was a very good response in bahiagrass yield in April and May, and this response continued through the summer months. Nitrogen application also significantly increased the crude protein content of bahiagrass in the April and May period.

It is important to obtain as much growth of good quality forage early in the spring. Brood cows are just coming out of the winter period, during which they usually lose weight and body condition, and are on the thin side. They are often nursing calves and being exposed to bulls for rebreeding. Thus, brood cows are in a period in their production cycle that has the greatest demands for good nutrition.

If you are going to fertilize bahiagrass, strong consideration should be given to the South Florida Beef/Forage Agents recommendation that 60 pound of nitrogen per acre be applied as early as February or March. We feel that a similar fertilization practice applies to other grasses as well.
For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate