Bahiagrass is Florida's Premiere Pasture Forage

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Bahiagrass makes up 80 to 90% of Florida's perennial grass pastures. Bahiagrass is popular because it is very dependable and almost impossible to mismanage. Even with sever overgrazing it recovers when the stress is eased by removing cattle, better forage growing conditions (rain and warm weather), and fertilizer. UF/IFAS workers showed that established bahiagrass needs only nitrogen fertilizer, applied at 60 units of N per acre in late winter or early spring. Bahiagrass grows well at pH 5, needing less lime than other grasses.

The only natural enemy of bahiagrass is the mole cricket. Mole cricket damage of bahiagrass pasture is spotty in most Florida counties, but are widespread and severe in Hillsborough, Polk, Osceola, Hardee, Manatee, and especially Pasco. Dr. Martin Adjei has worked on the control of mole crickets with nematodes, a procedure that appears to be working.

The nutritional quality of bahiagrass is 'moderately good' from April through November, providing forage with adequate crude protein (8-12 %) and energy (50 to 55 % TDN) for mature cows. During the winter, December through March, the quality of bahiagrass is 'moderately low', containing 5 to 8% crude protein and 40 to 45% TDN. With adequate forage for grazing and supplementation, brood cows winter well on bahiagrass pasture.

One grazing management tip is; do not carry over-grown, mature bahiagrass pasture into the winter. Over-grown bahiagrass will fall over and mat, providing little grazing. The mature forage available has very poor quality. Stage over-grown bahiagrass to a 6 to 10 inch height in late summer or early fall by grazing or mowing. Although bahiagrass withstands continuous grazing,
a weekly rotation grazing system between 3 or 4 pastures is recommended.

The year-round carrying capacity of bahiagrass pasture is variable, depending upon soil type and moisture. With nitrogen fertilization, winter supplementation (about 125 days) and hay feeding (as needed) a stocking rate of one cow to 1.5 to 2 acres is usually possible, and wean a 500 pound or better calf. Without hay feeding and limited fertilization and supplementation, 2.5 to 4 acres is needed for each cow.

The 'moderately good' quality of bahiagrass is a problem for young cattle, especially the first year after weaning. Yearling heifers require forage with about 11% crude protein and 60% TDN. Without supplementation and hay feeding, yearling cattle grazing bahiagrass barely maintain their weaning weight during the first winter and spring after fall weaning. When breeding heifers at 2 years of age, supplementation is needed such that heifers gain 0.33 to 0.50 pound per day during the first winter after weaning. If heifers are grazed on bahiagrass and bred as yearlings, moderate quantities of supplement and good quality hay need to be fed from weaning to breeding such that heifers gain about 1 pound per day. First calf heifers, either two or three years of age, grazing bahiagrass will require good supplementation from calving through breeding if a good breed back is expected.

All bahiagrass varieties are similar in quality. Dr. Paul Mislevy, agronomist at Ona, found that Tifton-9 bahiagrass yielded about 30% more forage, but the forage was similar in quality to other bahiagrass varieties. Dr. Mislevy and Dr. Ann Blount, at Quincy, are currently breeding better bahiagrass varieties which will be available to cattlemen in the next few years. They are placing emphasis producing a bahiagrass variety with better winter growth, hopefully they will also produce a variety with higher quality.

Past Peace River Farmer and Rancher articles written by Findlay Pate can be viewed on the internet at http://rcrec-ona.ifas.ufl.edu/PRFAR.html.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate