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Seeding Firebreaks for Cattle and Wildlife

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Firebreaks are often on range and woodland to act as barriers to fire. Often they are natural barriers, such as streams or ponds, or they can be formed by roads or drainage canals. Most often firebreaks are constructed in a manner similar to preparing land for pasture. Trees, stumps, and brush are removed, and soil is disked and leveled. A good, dependable firebreak is about 50 to 60' wide, not one or two passes of a disk as is often done. One mile of a 60' wide firebreak is equal to about 7.3 acres. Using estimated costs for clearing land for pasture at \$350/A (Prevatt and Mislevy, 1990, Econ. Info. Rep. 271), it costs about \$2500/mile to clear a firebreak through woodland, although probably less through open palmetto range. Once established, firebreaks can double as fence lines, they can be useful as access roads for moving cattle and equipment, and they can provide a great opportunity to provide forage for cattle and diversity for wildlife.

Pensacola bahiagrass is the best choice for a low cost, dependable supplemental cattle forage for cows grazing range from September to March. Method and time of seeding firebreaks are the same as for pasture, which can be obtained from your county agent for those not familiar with bahiagrass establishment. Lime and fertilizer are necessary to establish bahiagrass, but beyond that, unfertilized bahiagrass will accumulate about a ton/A of dry matter during summer which cows will utilize in winter to help minimize weight loss.

Firebreaks must be closely grazed during the fire season if they are going to be effective. Ranchers must plan ahead to insure that firebreaks seeded to bahiagrass are clear and offer fire protection when needed. If they are not grazed, firebreaks seeded to bahiagrass should be mowed and re-enforced with disked (bare ground) strips.

Seeding firebreaks (or portions) to an annual legume like *aeschynomene* can provide very high quality forage for deer in late summer and early fall plus lots of insects and seed for quail and turkey. Firebreaks should be limed (about 2 ton/ A) and seeded at 5 Ib/A of dehulled seed or 20 Ib/A of seed in the hull. Fertilize annually (about 40 and 80 Ib/A of P₂O₅ and K₂O, respectively). There should be sufficient seed produced each year to regenerate the stand. Disk lightly in June at the start of the rainy season to help regenerate the stand. Hold-off fertilizing until *aeschynomene* has germinated (wait until you have a stand). The firebreak can be disked in winter to keep it free of fuel during the fire season. Remember, establishment of *aeschynomene*, whether in pasture or in a firebreak, is at the mercy of the weather and is not dependable. You can realistically expect success in about three of five years.

Clean, well managed firebreaks can provide grazing for cattle and offer diversity to wildlife and at the same time offer fire protection.