

Grazier

Wheat crops can serve double duty as forage

Jim Clark of Arkadelphia, Ark., turned cattle loose in his wheat fields to solve a disease problem and reaped an unexpected bonus.

"We had problems with downy mildew on our wheat," Clark says. "Our county Extension agent [said] grazing cattle on it over winter would take care of it. It did, and the added income from the cattle made a world of difference on our cash flow."

L.B. Daniels, University of Arkansas animal scientist, says producers in Oklahoma and other southern Plains states have been grazing cattle on hard red winter wheat for years, but the practice was not common on soft red winter wheat grown in Arkansas. Daniels began studying the practicality of using wheat forage four years ago at the Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station.

"I took the approach that it's a production system that puts your land to work 12 months a year," Daniels says.

Clark liked the year-round cycle. "We

grew soybeans over summer," he says. "As soon as we got the beans out, we put in wheat and ran calves on it over winter."

Daniels says the cost to establish and fertilize a wheat crop averages \$100-\$120/acre. Producers can graze stocker cattle on the wheat until the end of February or the middle of March and get a net return of \$100-\$150/acre in weight gain.

"Basically, your cattle can pay for [the cost of] your wheat crop, then anything you make on the grain is profit," Daniels says.

"We grow more than a million acres of soft red winter wheat in Arkansas," he says. "If we graze cattle on half of that, we're looking at an additional \$75 million to \$100 million in agricultural income for the state."

Daniels says wheat grows well in the Arkansas climate, and each acre can support two to three times the cattle stocking rates of drier southern Plains states, up to 750 pounds (lb.)/acre without any effect on grain production.

"As long as the cattle are off the wheat by March 10, yields will be normal," he says. "Our test plots made the state average of 45 bushels an acre."

Daniels used 10 varieties of wheat in his study and found stocker cattle grew well both on the wheat and after they got to the feedlot.

"Cattle can graze with very little supplemental feed and gain 350 pounds per acre," he says. "The calves in our study gained 3.75 pounds a day in the feedlot and 70% of them graded Choice."

This production system also gives producers important flexibility in a weak farm economy. When prices are low, growers can run a second set of cattle on the wheat instead of harvesting the grain, Daniels says. The second set can be ready to go to the feedlot by late April. Then the producer can plant an early-maturing soybean and be ready to plant wheat again in the fall.

"On the test plots where we grazed until the end of April and planted Group IV soybeans, our test plots yielded 20 bushels an acre for dry fields and almost 60 bushels an acre on irrigated land," Daniels says.



Editor's note: *The University of Arkansas supplied this article.*



Animal scientist L.B. Daniels (right) and graduate student Clay Bailey collect wheat samples from a test plot used in a forage study. Research at the University of Arkansas has shown wheat producers can make a second income from their crops by grazing cattle on the wheat over winter.

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