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Grazing Winter Cereals in Spring

Kansas may be known as the wheat state, but other winter cereal crops such as triticale and rye make up a good percentage of fall planted crops. The increasing popularity of cover crops is a likely link to many of these planted acres for all the benefits that cover crops offer. I've already seen sprayers applying burndown on these lush green fields in preparation for spring planting. As a livestock guy, I look at those crops from a grazing, ruminant feed standpoint and see many benefits to grazing winter cereals from winter through spring, as a high-quality livestock forage.

When grazed from early April to early May, the forage quality of cereal rye, winter triticale, and winter wheat is similar, with all three species having the ability to be very high quality. Cereal rye can have greater growth during cooler conditions compared to wheat or triticale. This is the reason it can provide earlier spring grazing and is often the go-to crop. However, triticale retains its feed value better into late spring since it doesn't mature as quickly. This makes it well-suited for hay and/or silage, or for extending grazing well into June. Awnless varieties are better suited for harvested forages or for grazing out scenarios where the plants may be allowed to produce seed heads. Blends of these crops with the addition of legumes, brassicas and potentially other broadleaves, can maximize cover crop benefits.

Properly managed growing calves can gain 3 to 4 lbs/day on these winter forages. When grazing, the key to optimizing performance of cattle with high nutritional requirements, such as growing calves or lactating cows, is to keep the grass from becoming overly mature. Lactating cows need to be on an increasing, or at minimum, steady plane of nutrition as they move into breeding. This is especially true for first calf heifers who are still growing and maturing. Small ruminants can utilize this forage resource with success as well.

Managing forage maturity is key to maintaining availability of high-quality forage. Small cereal forages grow fast and mature rapidly, so it is important to actively manage the grazing to ensure the plants are not allowed to become overly mature. Proper stocking rate and grazing pressure is ever changing with this rapid growth rate. Begin grazing when the plants are about 5 to 6 inches tall and manage to keep the maximum height at 8 to 10 inches. Rotational grazing with higher stocking densities can facilitate a more uniform plant maturity, reducing selective grazing as well.

Look ahead at 1 or 2 pastures/paddocks and move based on how the plant is recovering. These forages grow fast and recover fast from grazing. The most common mistake when spring grazing small cereals is letting the forage get ahead of the livestock. It is important to increase stocking density as the spring progresses to ensure the grazing animal can keep up with the rapid forage growth. This can be achieved by either adding more animals or reducing the number of acres being grazed. For cattle, a good starting point is about 0.5 cow or 1 stocker calf per acre in early spring and increasing from there.

Like most cool season grasses in early spring, small cereal forages are also high in potassium. This means there is a need to provide supplemental magnesium in a mineral mix as potassium interferes with magnesium availability to the animal. A free choice mineral with a targeted 4 oz per day intake should contain at least 10% magnesium to prevent grass tetany in lactating cows and 5% magnesium to increase gains in stocker calves.

Soil compaction often comes up as a reason to not put grazing animals on crop fields to utilize cereal crops, but research at the University of Nebraska has shown that when these plants are grazed in dry soil condition, the compaction effect is negligible. To avoid grazing in wet and muddy times, have a plan to move grazing livestock off crop fields, if possible, or have a "sacrifice area" to hold animals if compaction is a concern to the cropping side of the operation. The University of Missouri has an excellent resource on this topic called ["Grazing Cover Crops-G4165"](#).