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Managing CRP for Hay or Pasture

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Abstract
The extensive flooding in the Midwest U.S. and its effect on forage and livestock enterprises have prompted our government officials to permit haying and grazing on land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) through several ‘emergency use’ programs. One permits haying or grazing after August 1 with a nominal ‘administration fee’. The other permits only grazing - sooner, but at a cost of 25 percent of the annual CRP rental payment. If you are considering the use of CRP land for haying or grazing there are some considerations and important first steps that you need to follow.

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Managing CRP for Hay or Pasture

By Stephen K. Barnhart, Department of Agronomy

The extensive flooding in the Midwest U.S. and its effect on forage and livestock enterprises have prompted our government officials to permit haying and grazing on land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) through several ‘emergency use’ programs. One permits haying or grazing after August 1 with a nominal ‘administration fee’. The other permits only grazing - sooner, but at a cost of 25 percent of the annual CRP rental payment. If you are considering the use of CRP land for haying or grazing there are some considerations and important first steps that you need to follow.

Both USDA-Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will be involved in the administration of the emergency use of CRP contract land. This means you will have to visit both local offices for details and final guidelines. Rules regulating use varies between the program options, so consult your local USDA-FSA and NRCS representatives to compare program costs and rules.

There is not much uniformity in CRP vegetation. Much of it is smooth brome grass or tall fescue-dominant; some is warm-season grass-dominant. Most CRP has some compliment of weeds and often some volunteer trees or brush. There may be considerable surface roughness due to erosion, rodent or ant mounds, etc. Fences are likely in disrepair.

The quantity and nutritive quality of the forage will vary with forage species, stand density, soil fertility, and degree of old, decomposing vegetation in the lower canopy. You are encouraged to do a thorough inspection of your fields to determine current conditions and any limitations that need to be addressed for each particular use, either hay or grazing.

How much forage is in those CRP fields? What is its feeding value? Data on this type of forage is limited, but my guesses are:

*Estimated standing crop yields on July 1* - One and one-half to three tons per acre, depending a lot on stand density, soil type, and how much ‘residual’, or old dead stems are present.

*Estimated yields on August 1* (as first use) - About the same, only a small amount of ‘new’ regrowth would be accumulating in the bottom of the canopy.

*Estimated additional yields of regrowth during summer and autumn* - One-third to one-half ton per acre more yield - with ‘normal’ Iowa summer weather, having warm, intermittent rain. With higher than normal summer/fall rainfall and cooler than normal temperatures, there would only be a slight increase in summer/fall regrowth, and little or no additional regrowth would be expected with higher than normal summer temperatures and no appreciable rain through late summer and fall.

Modest amounts of nitrogen (25-40 lbs N/A) would not be expected to add much added yield if applied in July before harvest or grazing. A modest nitrogen application in mid- to-late August, may provide economical yield
returns if temperatures and rainfall support good fall growth.

The nutritive value of the standing crop is relatively low; the 'damage has already been done.' This damage comes from allowing the forage plants to mature fully through June, thus accumulating fiber and diluting protein. Old, residual stems in the lower canopy add yield, but are lower yet in nutritive value. I don't think that there would be much change in nutritive value whether first cutting or grazing comes in July or early August. Crude protein (CP) of the standing crop on a percent of dry matter basis will likely range between 6 and 10 percent and dry matter digestibility, 45-50 percent, depending on forage species.

There would only be a slight increase in crude protein and digestibility if harvest or grazing is delayed and some new, leafy growth accumulates in the lower canopy. The greatest nutritive value benefits would be in the regrowth following initial cutting or grazing. Leafy, new growth would have a relatively higher protein and dry matter digestibility. Modest applications of nitrogen following initial grazing or harvest would add to CP and digestibility slightly too.

Some thoughts specific to grazing
The two current USDA 'grazing programs' vary. The 'after August 1' program restricts the proportion of the area or amount of forage that can be used. Both programs will likely include the basic conservation management guidelines for CRP that restricts grazing along riparian or waterways.

Fencing and water sources should be evaluated. Grazing livestock will be selective in their grazing and trample and waste considerable forage. Any effort to 'concentrate more animals in smaller areas (increased stock density), using temporary fencing, will improve the utilization of the mature forage.

If harvesting hay
Debris, stumps, rodent mounds or ant hills, ditches, etc. can damage harvest equipment. Thoroughly inspect fields that will be harvested.

Even though the nutritive value of CRP hay is relatively low, it still has an economic value. Minimize waste by using good storage and feeding management. To most efficiently use CRP hay in livestock rations, you are encouraged to sample and have it tested for forage quality. Some producers will be buying or selling CRP hay. Its price will vary by nutritive quality, bale type, and condition. Summer and autumn auction prices for CRP hay in 2007 ranged from $24 to $55 per large round bale and $45 to $70 per ton. Winter auction prices for 2007-2008 ranged from $57 to $59 per large round bale and $50 to $120 per ton.

Stephen K. Barnhart is a professor of agronomy with extension, teaching, and research responsibilities in forage production and management.