

News Column

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FERTILIZING BROME

Here we go again. As I write this (Thursday of last week) it is cold again,...so of course we are having more lambs.

And I'm tired and grouchy because of those middle-of-the-night barn checks!

I know what you're thinking. You're wondering why I don't take the advice I give to cattlemen and move my lambing to March and April. Or, maybe I should heat the barn?

Heating a portion of the barn has crossed my mind. However, it doesn't make good economic sense – as long as I'm willing to lose sleep during cold weather I don't need heat. But, I guess the barn never made economic sense in the first place....

We built the barn big enough to store hay, a tractor, and a few tools, while also serving as a lambing barn. That's all great when the weather is nice, but the barn is too big to heat when it is cold, and also too big for our small number of animals to heat it up themselves with body heat. If we decide to heat anything, it will probably be the old hog shed in which we used to lamb.

Why not lamb in March then? Well,...this is a hobby. We are trying to raise show lambs and they need to be born in January for our Kansas county fairs. December would work too, but most black-faced ewes won't breed for December lambs without some hormone therapy.

October, November, and December lambs actually make good sense for a commercial flock trying to have lambs ready for the Easter market, when prices are traditionally higher. If we decide to go that direction, we should switch to white-faced ewes that will breed out of season.

That's enough whining on that topic. Let's switch gears and take a look at brome fertilization. Specifically, how much nitrogen can you afford to put on brome this year?

We normally recommend fertilizing brome between December and March, during a time when the ground isn't frozen. Well, March is already here, and I'm probably not the only person who has been waiting for some moisture, and wondering how much high-priced nitrogen I can afford,... especially if it isn't going to rain.

I was thinking I would stick with my usual 80 pounds of N and just apply the same amount of N I would have applied when nitrogen was cheaper. Then, one day, I opened an email that had been sitting in my inbox for a month. The message was titled, "Bromegrass Hay Response to Nitrogen Fertilization", and was from Shannon Blocker, my counterpart in Pott County.

In that email was a publication by the same title that Shannon had put together several years ago, and dusted off and updated with current fertilizer prices. My conclusion, after studying the charts in her publication is that I should stop at 70 pounds of N, and maybe should back off to 60 pounds.

The answer to how much N will provide the greatest return depends on the price of nitrogen and the price of brome hay after harvest next summer. Rainfall will make a difference too, of course. If it doesn't rain, then the expected response to nitrogen fertilization won't happen and the answers in the publication are all wrong.

To sum up a bunch of charts and tables, what this publication says is that nitrogen fertilization will result in a rapidly increasing yield, up to about 70 pounds of N. Yield continues to increase past that point, but not as rapidly. So, the best bang for your buck when fertilizer prices are high is probably around 70 pounds of N per acre.

I posted the publication on our website so you can check it out yourself. Go to www.riley.ksu.edu, then click on Crops & Livestock, then Crops & Soils. “Bromegrass Hay Response to Nitrogen Fertilization” will be the last link on the page.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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