

With increased fertilizer costs, producers need to be more intentional when it comes to application. Profit margins will be slim if you keep the status quo. Below are some tips to help guide you through high fertilizer costs.

## Evaluate Lower Producing Pastures

This is where a soil test is vital. Do you have fields that struggle to be productive, often have more weeds, or have you seen a transition in forage species (more summer annuals than fescue)? Consider past fertilizer applications. Have you fertilized these fields later to encourage more warm-season grasses? Do you need lime? Often poor forage production can be related to low pH. A pH of 6.2 is optimum for fescue pastures and fields. Another strategy is to unroll hay in these pastures for winter feeding. This will help increase fertility and can help improve forage stands. The seed from the seed heads in the bale of hay can germinate to either increase forage diversity or increase plant population.

## Soil Test

We know you always hear, “do a soil test,” and you always think about doing it when you need to be putting out fertilizer. Just do the soil test! Knowing the nutrient levels in your pastures is the only way to know what nutrients are needed. This is not the year to apply 17-17-17 and has no idea how much nitrogen, phosphorus, or potassium your fields really need. Applying too much fertilizer is a waste of money; applying too little will result in less-than-optimum forage production. Make sure you leave enough time to get results. The turnaround time right now is 5 weeks.

## Reduce Stocking Rate

It can get expensive quickly in the cattle business. Between land prices and production costs, it's easy to see how producers feel the need to fit as many animals as possible into their operation. However, there is a point where too many animals will cost you in the long run. Finding the sweet spot where your pastures can support your herd numbers without a lot of additional inputs is key. Often producers forget to include calves when considering how many animals an operation can sustain. Considering a 1200 lb cow and a 350 lb calf, forage consumed prior to weaning is around 37 lbs of total forage per cow-calf pair, compared to 24 lbs of total forage consumed by a dry cow. Cull between now and May to capture increased cull cow pricing.

## Additional Forages

Consider adding clover to pastures - Frost seeding clover is a good option in February to increase pounds of forage produced per acre. Adding clover to pastures is a great way to reduce the effects of fescue toxicosis. If you add a clover to the field, the cattle now are consuming a forage other than just ergot-alkaloid infected forage, thus, diluting the amount of toxin consumed

## Rotational and Intensive Grazing

Distribution of manure throughout your pastures is an added bonus of rotational/ intensive grazing, along with an increase in grazing efficiency. Admittedly rotational grazing and intensive grazing takes more thought and planning initially but after some practice and time, it can be just as quick or quicker than putting out hay.

## Utilize Animal Manures if Available

If you can source other options like animal manures, utilize them this year. Just keep in mind that depending on the type you use will affect the rate of application. For example, when poultry litter is surface applied to pastures, an estimated 30% of the N is lost through volatilization. 60% is available to the plant the first year, and 10% is not available until after the first year.

## Rotate Fertilizer Application from Year to Year

After you price fertilizer for all of your acreages this year, this may be the option you come to first; it's one tool in the toolbox. Good record keeping will be important to track what was applied to which field.

## All Bets are Off with Hayfields

Forage is removed two plus times a year in hayfields. With each harvest, nutrients that the soil supplied the plant to grow with are removed. Forage is also removed from pastures, however; there are animals adding nutrients back through manure and urine. Think of it as a bank account; you can't keep making withdrawals without eventually needing to make a deposit.