

Pastures, forage and livestock

Before I became the Natural Resource Specialist for Highlands County, I really didn't know much about agricultural land management practices. Like so many others, I thought that livestock producers just had some cows or other types of animals and let them loose out on the pasture. I never really gave it much thought other than admiring the beautiful creatures and land while passing by in my car. But the process of managing land for agricultural purposes is really quite complex and takes a lot of thought and effort to be successful.

For example, did you know that there is really not a "one size fits all" plan for forage production. It's not as simple as going out to the field and planting some seed. Prior to planting, land managers have a lot to think about and plan for. Many factors such as soil type, topography, near by farm activity, labor resources, type of livestock and the goal of the producer must be considered.

Not only is it important for producers to be first-rate livestock managers, they must balance that skill with excellent forage production skills to be successful. The reason is that while it is important to have good animal management skills, profitable livestock production is mostly dependent on a producer's ability to efficiently convert forage (hay/pasture/etc.) into meat, wool or milk. If the animals have difficulty digesting what is available or they do not care to eat it, production will be severely impacted.

While certain animals may prefer one type of forage, it may not be the most nutritious for them. Therefore, the type of plant is critical as is the timing of the plantings. Different crops require varying planting seasons. To add to the challenges of the producers, weather and soil conditions can be a problem in different times of the year. So not only does the land manager need to be knowledgeable about livestock, but types of forage and time of year to plant the varying crops. Wow, this is getting pretty complicated!

Even if the producer knows the best crop for the livestock, they still need to know if that particular crop will do well in the soil type available. It is very important for the land manager to acquire the soil information prior to planting. Fortunately, the Natural Resource Conservation Service provides soil maps for all areas of Highlands County.

Another goal of the producer is to grow several different forages at the same time to allow good grazing throughout the year. In addition, knowing the type, how much and when to fertilize those different types of forage is critical. Let's add in some herbicide and pesticide management to the mix and things get even more complex.

As if all of that isn't enough, producers need to be grazing managers as well. Things they need to consider before they plant include; using continuous or rotational grazing methods? Where to put those fences to separate the pastures? How much of what to plant and where? The list goes on.

Now you understand that livestock management and forage production is a complex business. These producers need to be good planners and stay up with the latest information. Fortunately,

the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District through the efforts of the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is here to assist with advice, information and even cost sharing programs. If you would like to find out more about what we have to offer, please feel free to contact our office at (863) 402-6545 or visit our website at <http://www.highlandsswcd.org/> and click on the NRCS programs and activities link.

Agriculture is vital in today's world and when land is properly managed, pastures and forage crops harmonize with the natural environment. Most land managers are true conservationists and care not only about the animals they raise but the land in which they raise them on.