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Productive Management and Utilization of Forages on Small Acreage

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Drive around the countryside in many counties of Indiana and it becomes quickly apparent that many individuals have secured small acreage, less than 20 acres, for the purpose of having a home "in the country" or a place of their own to stable their horses or run a few head of livestock. Many small acreage owners are unaware of the time and financial commitment that it takes to manage the acreage. Also, for many individuals, the closest exposure to crop production and management was in high school or college biology, chemistry and economic classes that didn't discuss much specifically related to agriculture.

There are a few things that I have heard in conversation with small acreage owners seeking advice that has better informed me of some of the real world issues they face. I would like to share with you some of my observations.

Need for a local resource team Many individuals have not developed a list of local professionals that can help them with their specific questions and concerns. Cooperative Extension Service Educators are excellent contacts as they have much resource information and know local personnel (seedsmen fertilizer dealers, individuals that custom machinery hire, etc.) that can be part of a management team.

Need to understand importance of timeliness There is a lack of awareness of the importance of doing management practices in a manner that will improve chances of success. For example, seeding alfalfa on a soil not conducive to alfalfa production, not having a soil test, applying limestone today and seeding tomorrow, being unaware of the previous crop's herbicide program, seeding a crop either too early or too late, use of a less than ideal mixture for the intended purpose, and harvesting at too late of maturity, are examples of crop management decisions that have hampered production success.

You can't always get what needs to be accomplished done on the weekend. Making top quality hay in Indiana can't be relegated to the weekend or evening

procedures. Custom help or taking vacation time from a full-time day job will be necessary to make hay with less incidence of rain damage.

Need to understand biological limits Too often, individuals push way beyond any chance of success by overstocking pastures. A stocking rate rule-of-thumb that I use is a two-acre requirement per horse or cow-calf pair. Many times the stocking rate individuals have in place pushes the pasture to a drylot condition because of overstocking.

Need to communicate and coordinate farming practices, and/or have co-ownership of equipment. I sense frustration with many small acreage owners in the ability to get custom hire procedures done in timely fashion and with agribusiness firms in the extra time requirement necessary going back and forth to take care of small acreage as compared to the large half-mile long row type fields. To this end, if small acreage owners could better coordinate practices so that custom hire procedures could be done in the same day in the neighborhood, it may reduce some unneeded frustration. Also, it may be a worthy consideration for small acreage neighbors to co-own some equipment to be used for forage management activities as this reduces the investment dollars of each party; likewise, this may permit better control of when farm tasks are completed, provided not all owners want to conduct the same task in the same hour.

Need to document who does what verbal agreements with a hand shake are simple contracts, but they may not properly define who is responsible for different management practices such as fence repair, soil fertility maintenance, stocking rate, etc. I would encourage individuals that lease their small acreage to a renter to carefully consider issues of concern, have discussion on matters with the renter and for signatures of both parties to be on a contract to reduce possible confrontation over production issues at a later date.