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Oats Are an Annual Forage to Consider For Presently Idle Acres - Stan Smith, OSU Extension PA, Fairfield County

Due to last fall's extraordinarily wet weather, perhaps only half as much wheat was planted and ultimately harvested in Ohio this year. And, while those acres may have been intended for double crop soybeans, the persistent drought conditions have left many of them unplanted today. If you need forage, assuming that some timely rainfall might return yet this summer and into fall, those vacant acres are a prime candidate for planting oats and creating a harvestable annual forage crop yet this year.

Based on our experience in Fairfield County with oats planted after wheat harvest each of the past 10 years, if you can utilize a forage for grazing, baled hay, or silage late this fall, oats appear to be the most productive, highest quality, least cost alternative available to Ohio livestock producers at this point. In fact, if planted most any time in July or August, there's an opportunity to 'create' on a dry matter basis anywhere from two to five tons of forage while investing little more than the cost of 80-100 pounds of oats and 40 pounds of nitrogen. Admittedly across much of Ohio this morning, there's not even enough soil moisture to sprout an oat. Assuming we get some precipitation this fall, it remains an option for consideration.

Based on experiences with summer planted oats since 2002, Curt Stivison, who initiated this work in Ohio, and I offer these suggestions:

* Optimum planting date for oats from the perspective of yield is not until the first of August. Early August plantings also have resulted in the highest total amount of TDN produced per acre. Later plantings will be slightly higher in quality, but typically not enough so to offset the yield advantage of early August planting. While being more conducive to a mechanical harvest in early Fall, planting in early to mid July reduces both yield and quality. The earlier oat plantings also have exhibited more susceptibility to rust.

* Regardless the planting date, or variety, no-tilled seeding rates of from 80 to 100 pounds of oats have consistently resulted in optimum forage yields.

* Optimum nitrogen application rate has been 40 to 50 pounds per acre. This application not only produces the highest yields, but at current values of nitrogen, it's also the most cost effective rate. Higher rates of nitrogen actually appear to depress yields based on our 2008 plot results.

* Over the years, many growers have been successful using bin run 'feed' oats originating in Canada. Most of the concerns with utilizing 'feed' oats are obvious: no germination test, and the potential for bringing some weed seed onto the farm. One problem we experienced for the first time last year was that some of the Canadian oats in the "feed bin" were apparently winter oats. After getting started last fall, they went dormant over winter, and then elongated this past spring much like winter wheat does after breaking dormancy.

* The optimum combination of productivity and quality of August planted oats arrives 60 to 75 days after planting. Apparently due to the heat, oats planted in July mature more quickly and thus, rapidly decline in quality beginning 50 to 60 days after planting.

* Oats harvested 50-60 days after planting and while still in the boot stage of maturity may offer some regrowth that could be grazed.

* A weed control application of glyphosate is a necessary and cost effective practice prior to oat planting.

An additional advantage observed when using oats for an annual forage crop is the opportunity to capture the total tonnage produced with a single harvest cutting if grazing is not an option. Only making a single harvest late this fall is the most cost effective management strategy.

As oat harvest options typically beginning by November are considered, grazing provides the most effective and affordable alternative. In 2002, locally the Wolfingers strip grazed oats all winter and actually began the calving season on them before the oats ran out in mid March.

Dry baling oats in the fall has been done around Ohio, but it's a challenge considering that oats only dry about half as fast a grass hay. Cut in November, that typically means at least two weeks or more to cure them. Wet wrapping them is an expensive alternative. Using an in-line bale wrapper/tuber is a little less expensive per ton than individually wrapped bales if the equipment is available locally.

Oats won't die until temperatures have been in the mid 20's for several hours. That means they'll still be green and alive in December most years in Ohio. When they finally freeze, and if it's not a wet winter, growers may be able to let them die and dry while standing, get a few days of dry frozen weather in January, mow them, rake them and bale them quickly after they've essentially cured standing.

In Canada, growers have sprayed their oats with glyphosate and let them dry out while standing. Then, after a few weeks and at a time when they get a dry week, they mow, rake and bale them all in a day or two. Locally, that's been done once which allowed the oats to be baled in late December and January.

If grazing the standing oats is not an opportunity, perhaps chopping and ensiling oats is the best alternative for harvest. This offers several advantages over baling or wet wrapping. Obviously the issue of curing the plants for dry harvest becomes a moot point. Chopping and ensiling into either a permanent structure or bags is also likely less expensive than wet wrapping individual bales. Perhaps even better, as detailed by Francis Fluharty a few years ago in this publication, chopped forages are 30 to 60% more digestible than long stem forages.

Admittedly chopping and ensiling is likely more expensive than rolling dry hay, but when you consider you get essentially no storage losses, the timeliness of harvest which is afforded, and the more digestible feed which results, it's good alternative. And if you're able to bunk feed the chopped and ensiled oats, there will be no "bale ring" feeding losses to be experienced.

If you've not seen firsthand the results of summer seeded oats, this 8 minute video offers a number of photos: