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Planting Spring Oats

Farmers who did not get winter wheat planted or failed to get a stand established still have an option to get a spring oat crop planted for harvesting this year. That is because spring oats can be planted for grazing or hay.

Even with the substantial risk involved in this option due to insects, weather and plant diseases, it may be an option that allows producers to fill in for a shortage of forage. The factors for success revolve around drill-planting oats on a well-prepared seedbed.

There is not a wide selection of oat varieties to plant, but those used in the southern US are preferable to northern oat varieties. Feed oats have been successfully used for planting purposes. However, planting feed oats is problematic with noxious weed issues, unknown germination and high amounts of foreign material causing planting concerns. Although cheap, planting feed oats is rarely a wise decision.

The window for planting spring oats is between February 15 and March 10. Oats should be drill-planted on a conventionally prepared seedbed at a seeding rate of 80 to 100 pounds of seed per acre. Seeding depth can be as deep as one and one half inches, but depth of only three quarters of an inch will increase emergence, establishment, and forage production potential.

Forage production from a spring planted oat can average 1,500 to 2,000 pounds of forage per acre. Based on the forage production of spring planted crop, planning should include about 60 to 75 pounds of actual nitrogen per acre after stand establishment.

If used as a hay crop, the oats should be harvested at early heading for optimum yield and quality. For grazing, oat plants need to be a minimum of six inches tall.

Because spring oats mature quite rapidly once temperature begins to warm, management of the oats is vital to get the most out of the crop. If properly timed, a spring planted oat field can provide between 35 and 60 days of grazing for livestock.

As final note of caution, do not consider spring planted oats to be the fool-proof solution to remedy a short forage supply. There are many factors that can derail the best plans to grow spring oats. However, with a bit of luck, a field of oat forage can add some additional grazing or haying to remedy a short or non-existent forage supply.

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