



Oats as a Hay Crop

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One year ago this month I wrote this article and I believe it needs to be in the October issue once again this year. As I look back on the summer of 2011 it is not much different than 2010 or any other previous summers for the cattlemen in Alabama. Much effort is put into hay production throughout the summer months on most beef cattle farms and there are numerous obstacles for accomplishing this task. Some of these include: too much rain, too little rain, adequate time, armyworms, equipment problems and the list goes on.

It is my belief that most of us need to utilize more winter annual hay production in our operation. Without a doubt, one of our biggest advantages in Alabama is our ability to grow winter annuals. Several choices exist including oats, wheat, rye, triticale, ryegrass and clovers. I am going to focus on oats for a potential hay crop. Oats are extremely high-quality and once they have jointed and you harvest the forage they will be gone. The other extreme is ryegrass that will continue to grow as long as the weather favors it. Thus if we are over-seeding onto a warm-season perennial hayfield the oats will not hinder

our first cutting like ryegrass will.

By drilling oats into our warm-season hayfield in October we are setting ourselves up for an excellent hay crop next spring. The most dependable hay crop that I have each and every year is the cool-season annuals. There are no armyworm problems, no drought problems and thus yields are quite high. The only negative factor is the weather in April when we are trying to cure the oat hay. However, if we have to delay the cutting somewhat the quality still remains better than what we would experience with delayed cutting of a warm-season forage. Another option might be to preserve the oat forage as haylage or often times referred to as baleage.

Baleage is produced by baling the forage at 45 to 55% moisture. It is imperative to get the bales wrapped in an air-tight manner so that the forage properly ensiles. Oat baleage will contain about 57 to 61% TDN when harvested at the appropriate maturity and in excess of 12% crude protein. In fact, many times it will be much greater than 12%. For brood cows this would make an excellent winter feed product that would require very little to no supplementation. Calves can also be grown at

a reasonable rate of gain on baleage once they become accustomed to it. It should be noted that calves are slow to get started on most high-moisture, fermented feeds such as baleage. They simply do not eat very much of it until they become accustomed to it. The following are some of the considerations when planting oats this fall:

- Sodseed at 3 bushels per acre in mid to late October
- Apply a moderate amount of nitrogen in early spring
- Will yield good quantities of high-quality hay or haylage
- Does not hinder subsequent growth of warm-season hay
- Drought and armyworm problems are nearly non-existent
- Oats can be susceptible to winter kill in excessively cold winters
- Oats can be more sensitive to diseases than other small grains

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