

Making Grass/Grazing Profitable

Irrigation restrictions across many of the Great Plains states have given production agriculture a new face. Livestock growers are looking for different ways to maintain the rural lifestyle and remain profitable. Without enough water to raise traditional irrigated row crops, growing grass in the arid west is a viable option.

The first step is to understand how grass grows and what it requires to stay healthy. Studying range management and visiting a successful irrigated grass operation can be very beneficial. The first decision is to determine how grass fits in the operation and if traditional irrigated grasses or more drought tolerant grasses are a better fit. An experienced range scientist, agronomist or individual educated in natural resources can help with planning and whether a spring or fall planting best suits the individual operation.

When planting in the fall, the use of an annual warm season cover crop planted in June can be beneficial. The annual crop competes with weeds, firms up the seedbed, and provides protection against soil erosion. Harvest the cover crop in August. Then spray the re-growth with Roundup and drill the grass seed directly into the standing stubble. If planting in the fall without utilizing a cover crop, it is best to plant prior to September 1st. A grass/legume mix or straight legume should be planted at least 30 days prior to the average historical freeze date.

When planting in the spring (March 1st to May 31st), it may be beneficial to plant an annual nurse crop in conjunction with the grass seed.

The seedbed should be firm and weed free and proper preparation is essential to the success of the planting. A grass drill designed to handle all grass seed types with depth bands is recommended. Seed should be planted 1/4 inch to 1/2 inch deep.

The new seeding will need water within the first seven days. If natural precipitation does not occur within 2-3 days after planting, irrigation should be started.

Fertilization during establishment is not as important as when the grass is mature and high forage yields are expected. Taking soil samples for nutrient analysis and asking for fertilizer recommendations based on a desired yield of 5-7 tons of hay/acre is an excellent investment. Irrigated grasses typically require 150-200 lbs of nitrogen per acre annually applied in 2-6 applications. Phosphorus requirements range from 40-80 pounds per acre per year.

Optimum to maximum production with traditional irrigated grasses will require 3/4 inch to 1 inch of water per week. The source of water can be natural precipitation or irrigation, with the total annual requirement being 24 to 30 inches. If this amount of water is not available, drought tolerant or limited irrigated species should be selected.

For maximum yield cool season species should be watered from March 1st to November 1st. Warm season species are actively growing from May 15th to September 15th and will require water during this time frame. Due to their longer growing season, cool season grasses will out produce warm season grasses. The grass should be irrigated adequately to produce enough forage yields to recover the input cost of irrigation. If water is inadequate, the amount of production may not pay for the investment.

Grazing a newly irrigated pasture should be deferred for one year. The implementation of a grazing management system is essential. The key elements of a grazing plan should include proper stocking rate, cross fencing to create multiple paddocks, and 25 to 35 days of rest between grazing periods.

With proper planning and implementation, irrigated grass is a profitable alternative to traditional row crops.

Feel free to contact Pawnee Buttes Seed and let one of our knowledgeable sales consultants aid in developing a plan for you.