



Native grass provides cost-effective summer forage alternative

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Beef cattle production is the most extensive agricultural enterprise in North America. Development of heifers is one of the most expensive aspects of beef operations: for 30 months, producers feed these animals with no economic return.

Forage systems dominated by cool-season grasses (e.g., Fescue Belt) experience a slump in summer forage production, a problem compounded during extreme drought cycles. This can be a challenge for heifer development, especially where tall fescue toxicosis is an issue.

In a three-year grazing study recently published in *Agronomy Journal*, researchers compared a commonly used summer annual forage crop (sorghum × sudangrass

hybrid) to a native warm-season species (eastern gamagrass) for pasture for yearling beef heifers.

They found that both options produced ample amounts of forage when tall fescue was semi-dormant. Forage nutritive quality was similar between the two grasses, but the perennial eastern gamagrass provided a longer grazing season (112 vs. 65 days) and allowed for heavier stocking (1,788 vs. 1,392 kg ha⁻¹), producing more gain. The perennial's greater productivity, combined with lower average annual establishment costs, led to a lower cost of production than the annual.

These summer forage options can play a role in complementing cool-season grass pastures, particularly for animals with sensitive nutritional requirements like heifers. Productive, drought-tolerant summer forages can provide greater productivity, resilience, and profitability to the extensive beef sector where cool-season grasses are predominant.

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Keyser, P.D., Lituma, C.M., Bates, G.E., Holcomb, E.D., Waller, J.C., & Griffith, A.P. (2020). Evaluation of eastern gamagrass and a sorghum × sudangrass for summer pasture. *Agronomy Journal*, 112. <https://doi.org/10.1002/agj2.20204>

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