## Emergency Forages After the Floods

*By Rick Kersbergen, UMaine Extension*

The Northeast has certainly had its share of challenges this spring and early summer. While we had a short window of good weather in late April, it seems that the "April showers" led to rain soaked May and June. Most of us had experienced record rains in both May and June.

So where does this leave us for forage supplies this winter. Corn silage or grain crops in Maine were planted late if at all, and suffered from poor stands, rotted seed, lack of opportunity for good early weed control, nitrogen losses from flooded fields or from leaching. Many farms probably drove machinery in places that were too wet out of desperation and the resulting soil compaction will be an issue for years to come.

**Corn Field on July 4, 2006**

Harvesting hay or haylage in May and June was also impossible. Forage quality of material that is being harvested now (July 7th) will be of poor quality and palatability. Pastures also suffered from animal traffic and mud.

Nothing new to anyone in this article so far… Now for a little optimism. What does all this give producers for opportunities?

Pasture renovation opportunities! Since many of your pastures were probably damaged by foot traffic and plugging, now may be a good time to use this opportunity to renovate and/or add new species to the paddocks heavily damaged. Perhaps you may want to try planting some summer annuals that can help extend the grazing season, such as some of the brassica species. Brassica crops such as turnip, rape, kale, or swede are fast- growing crops that are good options for grazing. These crops are highly productive, and can be grazed from 80 to 150 days after seeding, depending on the species. These crops must be treated more like "concentrates" than "forage" in nutritional planning for livestock because of their high digestibility and low fiber content. You may consider using these crops in combination with some small grains to provide some fiber and limit the potential for off-flavored milk from lactating cows that are grazing.

Other options for pasture or field crops include planting small grains in mid-late summer (August) for either grazing or late harvest. Oats are highly productive in the fall and can provide good forage quality. Some growers are experimenting with new forage oat varieties as well. Oats can be under sown with clover or other legumes for a new perennial sod next spring as the oats will winterkill.

Winter grains are also an option for both grazing and early forage production for next spring. Many winter grains can be seeded in August and September and be grazed in the fall. These winter grains will produce either a highly digestible forage for grazing or harvest in the spring or be left for grain production later next summer. In Maine, we have seen some amazing forage production from winter spelt, and are beginning to evaluate quality. Other winter grains you may want to experiment with are wheat and Triticale. In Maine we have had poor experiences with hardiness of winter barley.

By the time you get this newsletter, it is probably too late to consider soybeans, but they can also be used as an alternative forage. Forage soybeans can produce high protein quality forage. Soybeans are probably best preserved as wilted silage since direct-cut silage is too wet to produce a good fermentation. Most "forage" type soybeans are crops with a maturity rating of 4-7. Most guidelines recommend planting forage soybeans in narrow rows (7 inch) and at similar populations as for grain.

A good website for more information about forage soybeans is at www.uwex.edu/ces/crops/uwforage/SoybeanForage.htm

When late season forage production is considered, the first crops usually mentioned are sorghum type plants, including grain sorghum, forage sorghum and sorghum sudangrass hybrids. Previously considered an "emergency" forage crop, the introduction of highly digestible, high yielding forage sorghums and sorghum-sudangrass crosses (BMR) have introduced many forage producers to a crop that is more than an emergency crop.

Sorghum-sudangrass planted late will be a one har-

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vest system. For sorghum sudangrass hybrids, seed at 65 to 70 pounds of seed per acre and plant at a depth of ½ to ¾ inch. Do not plant too deep! Rarely will weeds out-compete the development of sorghum sudangrass hybrids.

- Sorghum sudangrass hybrids contain high levels of moisture and will require wide windrow management to ensure rapid dry down. The shorter the time period, from mowing to ensilage, the higher the quality of the forage that is produced. This crop is an excellent choice for haylage or baleage production. Harvest stands at 3 to 4 feet height. These plants grow rapidly and soon after reaching 3 feet can reach 5 feet or more. Mow at a cutting height of 4 inches to encourage rapid regrowth. Do not harvest stands less than 2 feet in height.
- Graze or green chop only when forage is greater than 22-24 inches tall. Strip grazing is recommended to minimize waste.
- To avoid prussic acid poisoning and/or nitrate issues, don't graze plants
  - during or immediately after a drought, or under conditions where growth has been reduced
  - on days when a frost had occured. High levels of the toxic compounds are produced within hours after a frost occurs
  - after a killing frost until the plant is dry and brown as cyanogenic glucosides usually dissipate within 7 days.
  - after a non-killing frost until regrowth is at least 45 cm (18 inches) tall
- Don't green chop or ensile the forage for 3 to 5 days after a killing frost.
- Allow forage to ensile for at least 3 weeks before feeding. ◆