

Seeding Pastures and Fields This Spring

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What a winter we have been experiencing. I am sitting at my kitchen table writing this article in early February, 45 degrees and raining! As I drove back from New Hampshire last week, I was struck by the number of fields that were ponds with vast areas of pastures and hayfields completely submerged.

What does that mean as we head into spring? Most likely, there will be large patches of winterkilled perennial forages. Not only will these conditions kill some of the more sensitive plants, such as alfalfa and other legumes, but with these conditions, many grasses will also be winterkilled. Winter grains will also be in jeopardy.

Trying to be an eternal optimist (trust me, I am not very successful!), I encourage you to look at this as an opportunity. With pastures that may contain large dead sections, think about spreading grass and legume seeds and letting your cows or heifers graze and incorporate the seeds with their hooves in late April or early May. It will be important to control the grazing of these sections as the seedlings develop to allow good establishment. This method will probably be more effective than frost seeding, especially for grass establishment.

If the hayfield or pasture is severely damaged, consider using it as an early sacrifice pasture. Let the animals do some of the tillage work for you, before you reseed that field or put it into a new rotation. Perhaps this is the year you try something new like BMR sorghum sudan grass.

This spring may also be a time when a no-till seed drill could be very useful. From our experiences with the University of Maine no-till drill trials that we conducted on many of your farms, seed depth was a critical factor in success or failure. When we planted more than 1/2 inch deep, we saw very little establishment. You should shoot for a depth of 1/4 to 1/2 inch when possible. Soil moisture and the weight of the drill played a big part in the final depth of the seed. One of our most successful seedings was on an area of winterkilled alfalfa that was well drained and firm and we were able control the depth with our drill. Several years ago, a Maine organic farmer rented a local no-till drill and successfully seeded alfalfa into existing sod on more than 100 acres

that had been winter damaged. Controlling the existing forage by timely harvest to allow seedlings to establish is a key management point.

Winter grains that experience damage will respond differently. If populations are lowered due to winter injury, individual plants will probably respond by increased tillering and fill in to some extent. However, if large sections are dead due to ice and water ponds on the surface, then you will have to evaluate your options.

Many producers do under seed clover into small grains in the spring, and you may think about seeding the dead areas as you do this. Some of you may think about using the remaining winter grain as a green manure crop and change your rotation, planting corn or another warm season annual.

If you decide to plow up some dead sod ground to reseed, think about growing an annual (small grain if early...warm season annual if you are late) and seeding down the field in late summer instead. This will give you an opportunity to control some of the weeds in the seed bank. Late summer seedings usually have less weed pressure as well. As always,

when seeding down perennial forages, remember the basics. Soil test and make pH and fertility adjustments while you can. Firm seedbeds are essential for good seedling establishment and survival. Depth is critical--1/4-1/2 inch in clay & loam soils and 1/2-3/4 inch in sandy soils. Never plant below 3/4 inch.

Perhaps all my dire predictions of dead plants will not come to be! It is however always good to have a backup plan.

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| Frost Seeding Rates | lbs./acre |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Red Clover | 4-8 |
| Birdsfoot Trefoil | 4-6 |
| Alfalfa | 5-8 |
| Other Clovers | 3-4 |
| Perennial Rye/ Annual Rye | 8-15 |
| Orchard Grass | 3-4 |
| Bromegrass | 12 |
| Timothy/ Red Canarygrass | Not Recom- mended |