What are Georgia forage crops worth?

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When traveling through Georgia, it becomes apparent that many producers do not realize the value of forage crops. Many pastures are obviously considered "waste areas" and years of neglect have taken their toll on stands. Broomsedge infestations indicate poor fertility management; pigweed, dogfennel and horsenettle steal nutrients and water from useful forage species; and hay stored outside is ultimately lost to the weather. Why do some producers adopt this "wasteland" attitude and neglect the very plant sources that provide for their cows and grow their beef calves?

Pastures and harvested forages must be thought of as a crop so that producers can begin take full advantage of its potential. Like row crops, forages require inputs for efficient production of beef cattle. It's no coincidence that beef production costs are low and farms are extremely efficient in New Zealand where forages are treated as crops.

It is easy for U.S. farmers to realize the value of a peanut or cotton crop, but it is difficult to place a dollar value on forages. In this month's article, I'll discuss the value of forage crops and will review some preliminary results of a forage survey recently conducted in Georgia.

What are forages worth?

The economic value of hay and silage crops provides a direct measure of forage value in Georgia. According to the 2002 Georgia Farm Gate Value Report over 711,000 acres of hay and over 58,500 acres of silage were harvested in Georgia during 2002. Hay crops were the #11 agricultural commodity in the state with an estimated value of over $129 million annually. If hay, silage and straw values are combined, these crops produce almost 15% of all row and forage crop receipts. For reference, peanuts produce slightly less than 19% of receipts.

Remember that these are commodity values for hay and silage. Forages are the base commodity for other "value added" products (like beef). Harvested hay along with approximately 3 million acres of tall fescue and an unknown acreage of bahiagrass and bermudagrass pastures are also grazed to sustain dairy, beef and horse industries. The estimated value of these industries and their total value are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Value of commodities which are directly supported by forages in Georgia. From 2002 Georgia Farm Gate Value Report.

Commodity	Rank of Ag Crop in Georgia	Annual product value (in millions)
Horses	5	247.5
Dairy	6	245.9
Beef cows	7	242.8
Beef stockers	21	63.6
Goats	51	7.7
Sheep	61	0.5
Total*	**-**	**$808.0**

* Does not include direct sales of hay ($129.4 million).

While forages do not produce all of these livestock receipts, there is little doubt that without pastures and hay these industries could not exist in Georgia. Also remember that these estimates do not include agricultural commodities that depend on forages as a nutrient sink for waste disposal (i.e. poultry and swine industries- over $3 billion annually). It's apparent that forages are a valuable commodity that should be treated and managed as a crop.

Selected opportunities to improve forage profitability.
In late 2003 I surveyed county agents across the state to determine educational areas where extension emphasis should be focused. Even though responses were received from only forty counties, some interesting preliminary results from this survey are discussed below.

In Georgia, less than 28% of hay land is soil tested annually. Persistence and productivity of bermudagrass hay land is directly influenced by soil pH, potash, and phosphate levels. Phosphate availability is reduced in acidic soils and disease and winter injury are increased when soil potash is low. The simple practice of soil testing and following fertility recommendations would improve production and health of pastures and hay fields.

Hay feeding makes up a substantial proportion of annual beef cattle expenses. The survey indicates that *the average beef producer feeds hay for over 120 days each year*. This is almost identical to the number of days that hay is fed in Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee and Arkansas. The mild winter climate in Georgia provides beef producers with a unique opportunity to minimize hay needs and improve profitability. This can be accomplished through simple management practices like overseeding, stockpiling, and grazing management.

Rotational grazing can be used to improve forage utilization and improve nutrient distribution in pastures. Unfortunately *only 23% of farms practice some form of rotational grazing*. Improved grazing systems provide a significant opportunity which can improve both beef and forage production.

Summary
Forages are a valuable commodity in Georgia agriculture and contribute a significant amount to the farm economy. Begin to think of pastures and hayfields as crops which require inputs and management. Contact your local county agent for more information and consider attending grazing schools or forage conferences to improve your management skills. Fertility, weed control, hay production and grazing management should all be examined as possible sources of improvement.