



UI agriculture faculty evaluate alternative forage crops for Idaho

After Jim Kast harvests his cash crop of potatoes or sweet corn, he immediately plants a feed crop of triticale—a cross between wheat and rye. In late fall and winter, his 500 registered Angus beef cattle and an untold number of antelope graze his triticale fields. Come May, if it looks like he'll have plenty of water, Kast sows corn silage; if water will be limiting, he plants yet another alternative forage crop—drought-tolerant sorghum-sudangrass.

Why such complex crop rotations of cash crops, traditional forages, and alternative forages? "Trying to make agriculture pencil out is tough in this day and age," says Kast, of Elmore County's King Hill area. "There are a lot of good farmers going out."

Whether they're looking for less costly or less thirsty alternatives to alfalfa or trying to extend their public-land grazing seasons with crops or crop residue, Idaho producers need to know more—much more—about alternative forages. At UI CALS, Camas County Extension educator Cindy Kinder and Extension forage specialist Glenn Shewmaker are leading a statewide team that is building such an information base. Funded by an Idaho State Department of Agriculture specialty foods grant, the two-year project will help university educators and producers understand how to manage each relatively unfamiliar crop—and how much feed value to expect from it.



Photo by Glenn Shewmaker

A beef heifer grazes on winter wheat in April near Kimberly prior to jointing of the crop.

The project will include evaluations of crops growing in producers' fields as well as side-by-side comparisons in research plots. "Producers who grow alternative forages need numbers they can use in economic analyses," says Shewmaker. "Right now, they can't even predict the range of possibilities."

In Elmore County, Extension educator Mir Seyedbagheri says he has been "getting bombarded" with calls from producers about alternative forages: "Where can I find someplace to graze? How will orchardgrass perform in my field? What can I expect from this variety of triticale?"

Growers also want to know how long each crop must be in the ground before livestock can benefit from

grazing it or before it can be harvested. Kinder says that's why data on thermal or heat units will be collected by numerous small weather stations during the course of the study and then correlated with plant growth stages.

While the project's ultimate goal is to help producers improve their bottom lines, Idaho's environment will also benefit from expanded acreage in alternative forages, says Bill Hazen, Gooding County Extension educator. Back-to-back crops remove more nutrients left behind by fertilizers than one crop can, and winter crops reduce wind erosion during the soil's most vulnerable months.

"There's a lot of potential for alternative forages in our cropping systems, but they all take a little time, a little money and paying attention to detail," Hazen says. "When we get busy in the summer, it's pretty easy to lose a couple of weeks when we could be growing another crop. We don't always look at alternatives—but we need to. It makes the farmers a little more money and it saves the cattlemen a little money and it's worth the time."

