K-STATE Research and Extension | Wildcat District

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For more information,
Contact: Wendie Powell
Livestock Production Agent, Wildcat Extension District
wendiepowell@ksu.edu, (620) 784-5337

To Spray or Not to Spray

At the risk of becoming lost in a psychological debate, I ask, "What is a weed?" Some would say a dandelion or bermudagrass are weeds since they can be a pain in the garden. However, dandelions are edible and bermudagrass is great forage for livestock. In pasture situations, some folks consider anything that is not grass to be a weed, and even some grasses are looked upon with contempt. So, it is all about perspective; is the plant in a good location? My personal go-to explanation of a weed is anything that is undesirable.

Control of a plant can be difficult, depending on the plant. Weed control is necessary when undesirable plants are causing a decrease in productivity in the desirable forages. The plants to be controlled may be less palatable, or tasty, to livestock, have low nutrient quality, and have the potential for toxicity issues. Plants that have invasive characteristics should also be controlled.

The only way to know if your pasture has a problem is to get out there and look around. Pairing your observations with your production goals, you will find what plants need to be controlled, and which plants need to be encouraged.

Example:

Production goal: Grow feeder cattle from 350 pounds to 575 pounds in 3 months. Pasture plants: fescue, Bermuda, milkweed, yellow something, cheat, blackberry, white something.
Actions: Identify the unknown plants (call the Extension Office) and understand the natural growing seasons of each plant (desirable and undesirable).
Analysis: If the current undesirable plant population still allows enough forage to grow for the feeder cattle to reach the weight you are aiming for in the timeframe you are working with, then you do not need to apply any control measures to the undesirable plants.

There are three broad categories for weed control: cultural, mechanical, and chemical. Cultural practices are based on management, stocking rates, grazing season, and species of livestock. Mechanical practices generally involve sweat; manual removal of a plant (hoe/shovel), prescribed fire, brush hog, or bulldozer. Chemical practices involve herbicide application to

problem plants. Each category requires plant knowledge, growth season, effective control measures, invasive tendencies, etc.

When choosing to control undesirable plants with an herbicide, be sure to read the label. Some chemicals may be effective on a certain species up to a specific height but is no longer effective when the plant is mature. Time of the year and daily weather conditions will impact the effectiveness of herbicide also. Consider non-target plants that are in range of the undesirable plant. Droplets can carry with a breeze, causing drift problems. Calibrate the sprayer to deliver the correct amount of herbicide to the plant part.

In summary, knowing your production goals for a pasture and putting your shadow out there will give you an idea of what actions are needed to keep pastures in their best condition.

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Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service