

## **Keeping Your Working Lands Working**

**By JB Daniel, USDA-NRCS Forage and Grassland Agronomist**

Virginia's estimated 8.2 million acres of farmland not only provide food and fiber for our citizens but also support a robust wildlife population enjoyed by thousands of people every year. Almost three million of these acres are grasslands managed as pasture for grazing livestock, and are the backbone of our livestock industry.

Nearly all these grasslands are established in cool season perennial forages like tall fescue, bluegrass, and clovers, which form a thick sod that is typically very good for livestock for about six months a year. These grasses don't provide much forage when the temperatures rise and aren't suitable as habitat for ground nesting birds like the Northern Bobwhite Quail.

### **A Farmers Point of View**

"Getting through a hot, dry summer with enough fresh forage is one of the biggest challenges many Virginia livestock producers face each year," says Madison County cattle producer Carl Stafford.

He says production of cool season perennial grasses and legume drops significantly as the weather gets hotter. If we have a week of 90+ degrees and no rainfall, these cool season plants quickly go dormant.

"To maintain a more constant feed supply during the summer, I use switchgrass as my ace in the hole." Stafford adds. "This warm season perennial thrives in hot weather and is very productive in June, July, and August when my cool season pastures are not producing enough to meet the needs of the livestock."

"The 20 acres of switchgrass give my cattle a break from the endophyte infected fescue in the summer and my cool season pasture a break when it is not producing," he adds. "It's a win-win situation for my cattle and my pastures."

By establishing these warm season perennial forages in 25 to 30 percent of the pasture system, producers like Mr. Stafford can have a dependable source of fresh forage and greatly reduce the risk of a summer feed shortage.



Cattle grazing switchgrass in early August.

### **A Wildlife Perspective:**

"During the last 50 years, the quail population in Virginia has declined over 80 percent," says Marc Puckett, a biologist for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF). "Experts believe that the greatest detriment to this species is the decline in suitable habitat for nesting and raising their young."

In the past, VDGIF and USDA offered programs that encouraged farmers to help support larger quail populations by establishing habitat with native warm season grasses. Unfortunately, those old programs took the land out of production and the farmers were not allowed to harvest the forage during the

nesting season when it was considered best for livestock. As you can imagine, this approach greatly limited adoption because most farmers could not set aside their productive land for wildlife.

### **Research and Demonstration:**

Dr. Pat Keyser is one of several leading researchers who have studied grazing livestock on these productive summer grasses and documented the fact that this practice does not disturb ground nesting birds. The Director of the Center for Native Grasslands Management spent the last 11 years studying the management of livestock on these grasses.

*“My research shows it is a win-win for the livestock and the wildlife,” says Keyser. “These grasses provide tremendous forage production in the summer when it is really needed. Even while cattle graze these grasses in the late spring and summer, they also provide a positive benefit to ground nesting species.”*



### **A New Approach to an Old Problem:**

Recognizing the need to offer options that complement the farmer’s production goals, USDA is now unveiling *Northern Bobwhite in Working Grasslands*, a new program to get more farmland established in quail habitat. This program puts the farmer first knowing that, once the grasses are established as part of pasture systems, the benefits to ground nesting birds like the Northern Bobwhite Quail will naturally come.

*Northern Bobwhite in Working Grasslands* will be available starting October 1, 2017. Don’t wait, call now or visit your local USDA Service Center to ask your district conservationist about participating in this new program. Then, request to meet with your Private Lands Biologist to begin developing your plan to establish native summer forages on your farm this year!

“The Natural Resources Conservation Service and Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries are committed to working together to make this effort a success for the farmers and the wildlife on farms throughout Virginia.” — **JB Daniel, USDA-NRCS Forage and Grassland Agronomist**

“We are unified in this effort to work with farmers across the state to accomplish their production goals first while greatly expanding wildlife habitat and keeping farmland productive and working.” — **Marc Puckett, VA Dept. of Game and Inland Fisheries**