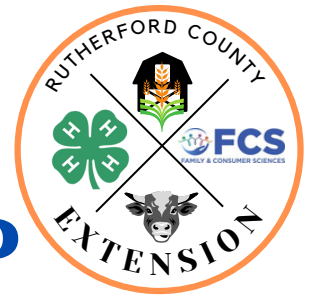


# Rutherford County

## FROM THE GROUND UP



December 17, 2024

### The Silver Lining...Thin Forage Stands Provide Opportunity for the Addition of Clovers

Anyone paying attention to Tennessee agriculture this year will know that 2024 has been a challenging year for crops. Lack of rain is the primary culprit, with Rutherford County recently being added to USDA's Livestock Forage Disaster Program. Adding insult to injury, many experienced the advance of fall armyworms with the resulting decimation of forage stands. With very thin forage stands in pastures and hayfields and limited, if any, grazing forage available, livestock producers will be relying on stored feeds instead of standing forage for much of this winter.



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As the old saying goes, “every cloud has a silver lining,” and the silver lining to our current cloudy conditions just might be the opportunity to renovate and/or improve thin forage stands. One of the most common recommendations to improve pastures is to add legumes. Typically, the recommendation is to broadcast seed in February to early March. The theory is that frost heaving will provide sufficient seed to soil contact for germination to occur. Thick stands of grass, however, will prevent this. For this to be a successful strategy, forage stands need to be very short and/or very thin. Hence the silver lining—a perfect description of our current conditions.

Legumes with their higher nutrient quality are a great way to boost quality in a field. Legumes are also known for the ability to fix atmospheric nitrogen into the soil, so grazing livestock reap the benefits of improved nutrition simultaneously with the legume provision of needed nitrogen to the soil, decreasing fertilizer requirements—making addition of legumes a no-brainer.

Sounds easy, right? Particularly with thin forage stands, legume establishment in a field is not complicated. If it's a good idea and so easy, why don't more of our fields have legumes? Most forage producers would say the difficulty lies in keeping the legumes in the field. Most herbicides that will decrease weed pressure will also decrease the clover stand. Until now, if producers sprayed to control undesirable broadleaf weeds, herbicides would also damage the legumes they wanted to keep. There is a new product coming out soon that promises to remove many of the major broadleaf competitors and not kill the white clover; good news for those interested in re-introducing clovers into their fields. With this promising new herbicide, it makes more sense than ever to plant clovers.

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Prepare for planting in February by cleaning up the current broadleaf weeds in the fields. Watch the weather and look for those 50 plus degree days. Those days provide the perfect spraying window to clean up fields in preparation for planting in February. Also, spraying those cool season broad-leaf weeds now while they are smaller allows us to use a lesser rate of herbicide than a late spring application.

Finally, it's a good idea to plan ahead and check availability of seed for the variety you wish to plant. Check forage variety trial results with University of Tennessee and also with neighboring states in similar growing conditions. There are some tremendous differences in yield between varieties, and it pays to do your research.

For more information about pasture improvement, please plan on attending our 2025 Forages meeting, called "Making Cents from Forage Decisions," on January 27th. Please call your UT/TSU Extension office at 615-898-7710 office for meeting details or for additional information for your operation or visit our website at [rutherford.tennessee.edu](http://rutherford.tennessee.edu).