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Native grass provides cost-effective summer forage alternative

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Heifers grazing eastern gamagrass during late summer drought. Although nutritive values are reduced by September, ample forage remains available.

Beef cattle production is the most extensive agricultural enterprise in North America. Development of heifers is one of the most expensive aspects of beef operations: for 30 months, producers feed these animals with no economic return.

Forage systems dominated by cool-season grasses (e.g., Fescue Belt) experience a slump in summer forage production, a problem compounded during extreme drought cycles. This can be a challenge for heifer development, especially where tall fescue toxicosis is an issue.

In a three-year grazing study recently published in *Agronomy Journal*, researchers compared a commonly used summer annual forage crop (sorghum × sudangrass hybrid) to a native warm-season species (eastern gamagrass) for pasture for yearling beef heifers.

They found that both options produced ample amounts of forage when tall fescue was semi-dormant. Forage nutritive quality was similar between the two grasses, but the perennial eastern gamagrass provided a longer grazing season (112 vs. 65 days) and allowed for heavier stocking (1,788 vs. 1,392 kg ha^{-1}), producing more gain. The perennial's greater productivity, combined with lower average annual establishment costs, led to a lower cost of production than the annual.

These summer forage options can play a role in complementing cool-season grass pastures, particularly for animals with sensitive nutritional requirements like heifers. Productive, drought-tolerant summer forages can provide greater productivity, resilience, and profitability to the extensive beef sector where cool-season grasses are predominant.

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Keyser, P.D., Lituma, C.M., Bates, G.E., Holcomb, E.D., Waller, J.C., & Griffith, A.P. (2020). Evaluation of eastern gamagrass and a sorghum ×sudangrass for summer pasture. *Agronomy Journal*, *112*. **https://doi.org/10.1002/agj2.20204**

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