

Trefoil Pasture Boom in Southern Iowa

By Glenn Cunningham

THERE HAS BEEN a big increase in use of birdsfoot trefoil to improve Iowa pastures because of its lush growth, long life, drought resistance and ability to withstand heavy grazing.

"It is the coming thing in pasture improvement," said Kenneth King, area conservationist with the U. S. soil conservation service. "I only wish it would come faster."

King and work unit conservationists and county extension directors in southern Iowa report that birdsfoot trefoil will produce a lot of pounds of beef per acre and it will not cause bloat in cattle or sheep.

Harold Holder, Centerville, extension director in Appanoose county, said that southern Iowa pastures improved with birdsfoot trefoil will produce at least twice as much beef as bluegrass pastures.

He cited results of several years pasture research at the Albia research farm which show that continuous grazing of trefoil has produced 330 pounds of beef per acre while continuous grazing of bluegrass produced only 130 pounds per acre.

"At the time when bluegrass pasture is dormant in July and August, trefoil is still green and has an abundant growth," Holder said.

"This year was a dry June, some of the bluegrass pastures were not providing forage for livestock while trefoil, on a similar type of soil, was lush pasture."

Approximately 10,000 acres of farmland in Appanoose county are seeded to trefoil and Holder predicted that much more land would be seeded to this legume.

He said the necessity of getting more production per acre to increase farm income has been responsible for a rapid change toward converting bluegrass to trefoil.

HAROLD HARPER, Leon, work unit conservationist in Decatur county, said "see birdsfoot trefoil as the coming thing. We have on 3,000 acres but we haven't scratched the surface."

He described Decatur county's trefoil pastures as "beautiful this year, despite

dry weather in June, which are capable of producing as much as 300 pounds of beef per acre."

"In comparison with trefoil," Harper said, "a lot of old bluegrass pastures which are root-bound and covered with buckbrush and shrubs wouldn't feed three rabbits per acre."

He said that where trefoil is harvested for hay, the tonnage from two cuttings exceeds three cuttings of alfalfa.

He said birdsfoot trefoil got its initial boost in some southern Iowa areas

where cropland was placed in the government "soil bank" for five years and seeded down.

"Where these seedings were mowed, to control weeds, farmers got beautiful stands," he said. "Trefoil crowded out all competition. It takes care of those old cocklebur patches."

CLAY BARNETT, Bloomfield farmer and chairman of the Davis County Soil Conservation District, describes trefoil as a wonderful plant.

"There isn't any other legume that will provide



HOLDER

KING

the summer forage that trefoil will. It provides good grazing from May 1 until late October. Bluegrass is an ideal companion crop. It supports trefoil and trefoil supplies the bluegrass with nitrogen."

Barnett, a former work unit conservationist who retired a few years ago, said lespedeza is a good legume "down here" when you don't have anything else but "everyone is replacing it with trefoil."

He described lespedeza as a dry season plant that doesn't come up until summer, and is done in the fall when frost hits it. He said trefoil still grows a little after frost and stock will still eat it."

Barnett has 80 acres of

birdsfoot. He said it sets a good seed crop even in a dry season. He has harvested from 60 to 100 pounds per acre.

"Some farmers complain that it's hard to get a good stand," he said, "but if you seed it with red clover and make hay out of it the following year you'll have almost a perfect stand."

"About 50 per cent of the seed won't germinate the first year but will germinate the second year, following freezing and thawing. That way you

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TRIO IN TREFOIL—These three little girls in birdsfoot trefoil are (from left) Jeannie Barnett, 9, and Andrea Barnett, 7, daughters of the Clayborn Barnetts of Knoxville, and Valerie Madison, 8, daughter of the Donald L. Madisons, Des Moines.—Staff Photo by Maurice Horner.

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More Beef Per Acre Produced on Trefoil

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get a good hay crop every year.

"A lot of our farmers would just as soon have it for a hay crop as alfalfa because they get an awfully good yield. Some seed it with timothy and red clover. Red clover here outyields alfalfa."

Barnett has been growing trefoil for 12 years. He sows a meadow mixture of 8 to 10 pounds red clover, 5 pounds trefoil, 3 to 5 pounds timothy, and 2 bushels of oats per acre.

JOHN K. MADDY, agronomist in Iowa for the U. S. soil conservation service, estimated that

Iowa now has more than 150,000 acres seeded to birdsfoot trefoil.

This compares with 75,848 acres on 5,800 farms reported by a survey in 1958.

Maddy said it is "very winter hardy and we're getting quite a bit of trefoil in the dairy areas of northeastern Iowa."

He said trefoil is a summer-growing plant, continuing its growth when bluegrass becomes dormant but it is not as drought resistant as alfalfa in a dry year in the deep loess soils of western Iowa.

Maddy said one farmer reported 600 pounds of beef per acre from trefoil in the 1958 survey but that most estimates ranged

around 300 pounds per acre.

Most farmers follow a practice of continuous grazing, Maddy said, al-



BARNETT

MADDY

are obtained in "put and take" systems in which the number of animals is changed to permit most efficient grazing.

He said there are 160 to

180 days of grazing on a trefoil pasture in Iowa under average conditions.

MADDY SAID trefoil had been slow to catch on in Iowa because seed was rather expensive at first, compared with the price of alfalfa seed, and it took several years to learn how to seed it and manage it.

"In order to seed it in permanent pastures, there's quite an expense in renovation, if you figure your time, labor, fertilizer, etc.," Maddy said. "It could run though maximum results \$25 to \$30 an acre."

Maddy recommended planting 2 or 3 pounds of orchardgrass and 6 pounds of trefoil per acre in seeding down cropland. He advises sowing trefoil alone at a rate of 6 pounds per acre in renovating an old bluegrass pasture. One bushel of oats per acre would provide the nurse crop.

Maddy said that only spring seedings are recommended and they must be well-grazed and mowed the first year.

Maddy advised starting the grazing when the oats are 4 to 6 inches high, except when the fields are wet. Mowing is necessary to destroy weeds and other growth which livestock won't eat.