

ALTERNATIVE WARM-SEASON FORAGE SYSTEMS FOR WEANED BEEF HEIFERS IN THE ALABAMA BLACK BELT SOIL REGION

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Endophyte-infected tall fescue (ETF) is the predominant perennial forage used by beef cattle producers in the Black Belt prairie soil region; therefore most beef heifers are developed using ETF as the forage source during the development phase of their production. Summer perennial grasses could provide an alternative forage option to reduce the impacts of ETF on heifer performance. The objective of this study was to evaluate herbage mass and animal performance of weaned beef heifers grazing a mixture of big bluestem, little bluestem, and indiagrass (NWSG), ETF, or ‘Pensacola’ bahiagrass (PB) at the Black Belt Research and Extension Center (BBREC) in Marion Junction AL. Paddocks were continuously stocked with four weaned Angus × Simmental beef heifers from early June through late August 2018 (71 days of grazing). Additional put-and-take heifers were used to manage forage to a target herbage mass of 2,000 lb DM/acre. Forage mass was collected every two weeks during the trial and animal weights were collected every 28-d. Year one data indicates PB (2,812 DM lbs/acre) and ETF (2,168 DM lbs/acre) had greater yields compared to the NWSG system (1,777 DM lbs/acre). No differences were observed among the systems for initial BW, final weight, ADG, BCS across the grazing season illustrating similarity across forage systems. Year one data indicates summer perennial grasses could be used as an alternative forage system for developing beef heifers, but supplementation may be needed to sustain desirable levels of gain. Heifers from this project will be tracked through breeding to evaluate conception rates and longevity in the herd.

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