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Basin Wildrye—It's More than Just Another Forage

Charles M. Jarecki

Are you searching for a native range plant that will produce abundant winter forage and livestock shelter and is also capable of producing a good yield of hay as an alternative use? If your ranch is in the bunchgrass region of the Northern Rocky Mountains and Northwest or in the Great Basin, then look no more. Basin wildrye (*Elymus cinereus*) is what you need.

In Montana, Basin wildrye is found throughout the state, generally on flood plains or areas receiving additional moisture. It is tolerant of alkali soils. The mature plants may have a basal diameter of 2 to 3 feet with leaves up to 18 inches long. On very productive sites plants often reach a height of 6 feet.



Basin Wildrye provides an abundance of forage and offers good winter protection from the wind and cold.

Basin wildrye is sensitive to repeated grazing in the spring when it is also most palatable. However, winter snows and frost soften the mature plants, making for a fairly palatable winter forage despite its large, coarse stems and leaves.

The author is a rancher in Polson, Mont.



Penny Jarecki shows that Basin wildrye does grow head high to a tall horse.

Basin wildrye fields are only grazed in the fall and winter on our ranch.

Most of the Basin wildrye that we have on our ranch is the result of seeding. The soils are moderately fine textured glacial soils with an abundance of rocks. Elevation is 3,100 feet; annual precipitation is 14 inches with July and August generally being dry months.

Seeding was done on summer fallow in early spring using a standard double disc grain drill with 14-inch row spacing. Seeding rate was 4 pounds of pure live seed per acre. An agitator is necessary in the grain box.

Cattle were permitted to graze the area in late fall and winter from the first year since the seeded areas were co-mingled with native bluebunch wheatgrass rangeland and



After a belly full of good alfalfa hay and standing grass, cows are content to bed down and seek shelter within the robust Basin wildrye plants.

irrigated alfalfa hayland. No herbicides were used in the seeded acreage the first year since our experience shows that cattle prefer to graze sprayed areas excessively. By the end of the third growing season, despite grazing each fall and winter, the Basin Wildrye had developed into large, robust plants.

Although occasional hay crops have averaged 1 1/2 tons per acre, the predominant use of the Basin wildrye has been for fall and winter pasture and shelter.

In the fall the cows eat a few select plants, utilizing mostly the leaves. By the time winter sets in and snow covers other native grasses such as bluebunch wheatgrass and rough fescue, the Basin wildrye is still providing grazing roughage. This standing forage is supplemented with alfalfa hay, fed

daily to the cows on the Basin wildrye fields. Depending on the quality of the hay, up to 75% of the diet may be Basin wildrye. As the cows consume the hay, they eat much of the remainder of the tall grass. They also bed down among the grass plants at night, out of the wind, with natural dry bedding beneath them. The natural accumulation of droppings in this area further increases the production of the Basin wildrye.

We have been using this management practice for the past 10 years and we are convinced that our wintering costs are reduced and the cows are better able to withstand the stress of winter. Basin wildrye has proven itself to be an important grass in our total range management. ●

