

Sudangrass Poisoning

of livestock minimized by good management practices

Milton D. Miller

Only three alleged cases of prussic acid poisoning from sudangrass were reported in California during the first nine months of 1948.

Careful investigation of these cases has shown that in two of them sudangrass was not involved. In the third case, the only one in which sudangrass clearly might have been involved, 14 head of beef cows were lost out of 150 head of cows and 150 calves placed on the pasture.

These animals were driven from a mountain range 12 miles distant and received no feed for about 24 hours prior to being placed on sudangrass. The owner turned the hungry stock into the sudangrass on the evening of June 12 and found 14 head dead the next morning.

The surviving stock was then immediately removed, except one old cow. She thrived on the pasture for three weeks without difficulty, so the owner then turned 500 ewes with lambs into the field without trouble. Later 50 head of beef cows with calves were turned into this same pasture, with the loss by undetermined causes of one cow on the second night.

The dead animals were examined clinically by well qualified veterinarians who expressed the belief that possibly prussic acid poisoning might be involved in the case of the original 14 head. However, laboratory analyses were not completed

on the specimens obtained from the carcasses because of a transportation delay to the laboratory.

Considering the thousands of acres of sudangrass pastured during 1948 in this state, it is reassuring to know that only in one unusual instance can this very valuable forage crop be suspected of causing difficulty.

California stockmen have profitably and extensively used sudangrass with only a few rare cases of difficulty since it was introduced in 1909.

In the few California cases, scientists have been unable to definitely prove prussic acid alone to be involved. Nor should it be forgotten that stock losses are occasionally experienced on most any type of feed.

The University Farm has used sudangrass for years under all sorts of conditions, with no difficulty whatsoever with any type of stock. In general, this has been the experience of practical stockmen elsewhere in the state.

Sudangrass has grown to be California's most important summergrowing annual hay and pasture crop, with 150,000 acres being used in 1948, mostly for pasture.

Here are safety guides which all careful stock managers who employ sudangrass should follow to be on the safe side:

1. Use pure Sudangrass 23 seed free of

mixtures of Johnsongrass and other sorghum varieties and plant on clean land.

2. Sudangrass should be at least 12-18 inches tall at the beginning of each grazing period.

3. Don't turn excessively hungry stock on to sudangrass without first giving them a good fill. Grain hay is best for this purpose but any good roughage can be used.

4. Drouthy or frosted sudangrass should be grazed with caution.

5. Suspected sudangrass should be tried first by turning in a single hungry less valuable animal. Watch this animal closely. If it stops eating in about 15 minutes and shows signs of discontent, remove it promptly. Retry the pasture a few days later. If all goes well in the test, using recommendation Three, the remaining stock may be pastured. Watch all animals for an hour.

6. Since tall sudangrass—12 to 18 inches or more—is usually safe for pasturing, it may also usually be safely made into hay or ensilage. Hay or ensilage made from a stunted crop should first be tried on a less valuable animal before general use.

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The above report is based upon special field investigations made of reported 1948 cases of prussic acid poisoning from sudangrass.

Sudangrass, California's most valuable summer-growing annual forage crop. This Yuba County pasture is at the correct height for safe initial grazing.

