



NEW YEAR, NEW STRATEGY: DEVELOPING A F.O.R.A.G.E PLAN FOR 2026!

Jennifer J. Tucker, Ph.D.
Department of Animal and Dairy Science

As we enter a new year, this season naturally encourages reflection and redirection. Many of us see the New Year as an opportunity to refresh, get back on track, or start something entirely new. For those of us in the livestock and forage industry, this is an excellent time to evaluate our operations, review our forage programs, consider the successes and challenges of the past year, and establish new goals for the future.

I'll be the first to admit that I don't always stick to New Year's resolutions, but I've learned that success comes more easily when I approach new goals with a clear, thought-out plan. So let's make a resolution for 2026—to improve our operations by developing a forage plan!

Creating a forage plan can feel overwhelming, especially when we focus too closely on the gap between where we are and where we hope to be. To simplify the process, it helps to remember a few key points. I'm a fan of acronyms, so in this article, we will use F.O.R.A.G.E. to guide our planning process.

F – Focus on the positives of your current operation.

We often become discouraged when we focus solely on the size of our “ultimate goal.” This can cause us to abandon new initiatives and slip back into old habits. Instead, stay positive and set small, attainable benchmarks that move you forward. Each step—no matter how small—is progress. Stay positive, take manageable steps, and stick with it.

O – Open-mindedly consider your goals and available options.

Start by imagining what your ideal forage system would look like. Then narrow your focus to changes you can realistically implement within the next year. Stay informed about new techniques and technologies, and lean on your County Extension Agents—they are invaluable sources of current forage information and can help you develop a workable



plan. Doing the same things year after year will produce the same results. Be open to new ideas and innovations.

R – Realistically develop a plan with simple, attainable goals.

Know your forages, soil types, and fertility status. If you don't have recent soil tests, now is the time to start. For pastures, a good rule of thumb is to test one-third of your farm each year. For example, if you have 12 fields, test four fields per year so each is evaluated on a three-year rotation. Hayfields should be tested annually.

A – Assess your current forage program before making changes.

Identify the forages in each area of your farm and evaluate the condition of each stand (great, good, fair, needs improvement) during active seasonal growth. Determine your forage pitfalls and challenges and what actions could help to address them. Assess how and when each forage will be used throughout the year to define the forage system of your operation, and your overall production goals. Know what type of livestock and their stage of production at the time of consumption of the forage and in what manner, will they be grazing or consuming stored forage as feed later in the season.

Be honest about the time and management level you are willing to commit. When planning improvements, evaluate soil fertility, forage suitability, and the timeframe required. Some forages offer quick impact, such as annual grasses and legumes, while perennial systems may require longer-term establishment. We are fortunate in Georgia that we can grow a variety of forages, both annual and perennial, that can help us sustain our operations for most of the year when we find the right combination.

G – Generate factual data for long-term recordkeeping and planning.

This is the most important step. Develop a record for each field that includes:

- (a) acreage and forage type
- (b) current fertility levels (based on soil tests)
- (c) fertility applied to date and future needs
- (d) current use (hay or grazing)
- (e) current productivity (grazing events, stocking density, or hay harvests)
- (f) future plans for the area



(g) other relevant notes, like herbicide use that could impact future planting plans.

Measure forage production based on quality and quantity during optimal periods, not just total yield. Compare seasonal forage production and nutritional value with animal needs. Use farm maps with consistent field numbering, and consider adopting digital tools or apps for record keeping. There are several new digital technologies that are available now that allow you the opportunity to update your digital records in real time from the field. This allows for easier maintenance of records and decreases the potential of getting behind or forgetting to record the “mental notes” we often forget by the time we return to our computer or notebook.

E – Evaluate your plan regularly.

Document changes you’ve made, results you observe, and new ideas you want to explore. Keep detailed notes and revisit them often. Reflect on where you started, where you want to go, and how much progress you’ve made. Written records will outlast your memory and provide critical insight over time.

Most of all, remember:

- Mistakes are not failures—they are lessons. As I was often told growing up: “The failure is not in the mistakes we make. The failure is in not learning from them and repeating them.”
- Success requires continual effort. There will always be challenges, but having a plan provides the framework needed to stay the course. Build flexibility into your plan; a rigid plan can be just as problematic as no plan at all. Adaptability leads to long-term success.
- Nobody is great at something the first time they try it. Take time to master the small steps before moving on to the next. When you look back a year from now, you may be amazed at how far you’ve come by maintaining forward momentum.

“A Goal without a Plan is just a Wish!” – Antonie de Saint-Exupéry. In 2026, let’s move past hopes, wishes, and ‘someday’ ideas. With clear planning and practical steps, we can bring real progress and strengthen our livestock and forage operations.