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Hay supplies are down and many hay fields are thin this spring. Planting oats might be one of the surest ways to boost hay supply for cattle this year. Stick around.

With little hay carryover, hay fields thinned by drought and pastures also weakened by drought, growing extra forage this spring might be wise. I think oat forage could be more important than ever this spring.

I like oats for several reasons. It grows during cool spring weather when we are most likely to receive some rain and when soil moisture is used most efficiently to produce forage. So risk is low and seed is relatively cheap. Plus, you can use oats several ways.

Oat hay is ideal for young livestock if cut when oats just begin to head out. Or you can increase yield by about one-third and cut oats in the early milk stage for hay that's excellent for stock cows. Also, oats in the milk to early dough stage make excellent silage.

If you get lucky and other hay fields yield enough so neither oat hay or silage are needed, you still can cut oats for grain and straw. Or, oats planted under irrigation can be cut for hay early enough to permit double cropping to soybeans or a summer annual forage crop, or even to corn for silage.

Drill two to three bushels of oats per acre into new fields for hay. With good soil moisture and 60 to 80 pounds of nitrogen, oats will produce two to three tons of hay for harvest in June. You also can thicken existing hay fields by drilling a bushel or two per acre as soon as possible directly into the existing crop.

You probably need a cheap and reliable temporary feed source this year. Oats may be your best option.