With the recent heavy rainfall, many winter annual forage plantings have been delayed. Later planting dates and wet soil conditions may necessitate some changes in planting decisions. The information below is intended to supplement Clemson Extension Forage Leaflet 20: *Winter Annual Grasses for Forage* which outlines the basic winter annual species and methods of establishment under normal conditions.

Most fall planting changes caused by the heavy rainfall in 2015 are related to clean till practices and forage species selection. It appears that, even though the last cutting of bermudagrass hay was delayed by weather, the planting dates and forage yield potential for winter annuals interseeded into bermudagrass or bahiagrass have not been altered. Remember, that we are typically planting in mid-October in these fields under the best of conditions. Since October is typically a dry month in normal years, dry soils often delay germination and growth in these fields until early November. The wet weather may actually help forage establishment and production this year.

In clean till situations, the fall forage production advantages of cereal rye no longer exist in delayed planting situations. Rye can still be successfully planted, particularly if there are winter injury concerns; but, not for the sole reason of improved fall forage production. Consider a switch to oats or wheat depending on seed availability and prices. In areas where annual ryegrass is not an issue in subsequent crops, plant pure stands of annual ryegrass at increased seeding rates to encourage rapid establishment and forage production. Up to 35 pounds of annual ryegrass seed per acre can produce fall forage yields equal to cereal rye in no-till situations. Crimson, arrowleaf and ball clover remain valuable additions to ryegrass stands and can still be included if soil fertility is favorable and no herbicide plantback restrictions exist. For most no-till situations where winter annuals are to be
planted into bermudagrass or bahiagrass, a standard annual ryegrass planting with or without annual clovers is likely the best option.

While timely planting is important, be careful not to push too hard to get into the field. Since the extensive root systems in bermudagrass fields will normally support equipment in wet conditions, these areas are often planted as soon as possible following a rain. Sidewall compaction can be problematic in no-till plantings and is detrimental to germination and seedling vigor. While this can occur in all but the sandiest of soils in no-till situations, heavy soils are most at risk and soils that are compacted from hay equipment (think recent late bermudagrass hay cuttings on wet clay soils) can be particularly problematic. Delaying planting by just a couple of days often completely eliminates sidewall compaction issues. Good healthy bermudagrass roots at the soil surface often prevent this sidewall compaction, but not always. Take a close look at furrows when beginning planting in each field if there are any concerns.

Because of the wet conditions, make sure that the purchased seed is of high quality (high germination) and is free of noxious weed seed. Cheap seed are still no bargain. If at all possible, purchase small grains seed that has been treated to prevent seedling diseases. The best ryegrass varieties are in short supply in 2015, and it is late in the planting season. This will limit ryegrass variety selection options.

Soil fertility at planting is as important as ever in these conditions. Soil testing always is the gold standard and is highly recommended. However, time often does not allow for soil sampling and analysis and adding potash to starter fertilizer applications will likely be beneficial following heavy rain events. Excess moisture probably leached significant amounts of potassium below the root zone of seedlings, and the risk is higher in coarse textured soils. With late planted forages it may also be wise to cut back on nitrogen applied at planting with the understanding that fall forage production potential is lower and nitrogen loss could be higher due to shallow roots. If lower nitrogen rates are applied in fall, additional nitrogen will be necessary in the spring when conditions are favorable for forage growth. These fertilizer recommendations are less critical in the heavier soils of the Piedmont, but a soil test in this area is still recommended.
Best wishes for a productive fall planting season. Even with delayed planting in 2015, winter annuals remain an excellent option for reducing hay needs and providing high quality feed in the winter and early spring months.