

# Grazing Bites

January 2016

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It is really January, but for quite a bit of the state it still doesn't feel or look like January yet. I'm not a fan of cold weather or snow so I don't have too many complaints. Generally a week or two of some snow is sufficient and occasionally useful for me, and then I'm ready to see the ground again.

Cold weather can have some advantages, especially after some of the rains we received in December. If you are having to concentrate livestock or are wanting to graze, saturated ground, frozen ground or free concrete has some advantages. I've not seen much yet, but I'm sure frozen ground and snow will be here before too much longer. I'd prefer to have frozen ground prior to snow. If snow comes first, you are usually in for a muddy mess.

If you are grazing stockpiled forage, frozen ground helps to protect the soil surface and helps prevent compaction from hooves. In reality, if you have a good stand of stockpile, it has to get almost bitter cold to freeze that ground up much. The blanket of forage serves as pretty good insulation. If I have to dig a hole in the winter time, I'm for sure going to dig where I have heavy sod, it is most likely not frozen.

When we get winter rains or melting snow, the pastures with more cover or stockpile have very little runoff as compared to pastures that were grazed down and left with little cover or growth. Occasionally, I will need to bury a waterline shallower than I really want or should. If that is the case, then I will try to put that shallow pipe where it will have more winter cover or plan for it or figure on draining it. Along an electrified fence row is a good option; there is always more cover there to provide some winter insulation. If I have to go across a driveway or area that will have little cover, then it is always best to plan to go deeper than normal; I usually go four feet.

Pastures with a good stand of stockpiled forage, especially tall fescue that are just now being grazed, will have a very good and massive root structure below ground. These conditions will be much more tolerant of grazing under wetter conditions than pastures that have been grazed closer or kept grazed shorter into the winter. The more plant growth above ground, the more root and structure below ground.

Now, that being said, I will step up on my soap box for just a minute. I know the weather has been nicer than normal, and I know we have had later forage growth than we normally have, but that is no excuse to leave livestock on the pasture unless adequate forage is present. Pastures that were stockpiled and not grazed until the forages went dormant (I'll hit on this dormancy more in a minute) will respond quicker and yield better in the spring than forages that either were grazed prior to dormancy or never rested.

I'm not sure we have ever really reached true dormancy for our cool season forages, especially in the southern half of Indiana. Most of our cool season forages go dormant by early November. I think ours have tried to a couple times, but with extended periods of really warm weather, the plant just doesn't know for sure what to do. These forages are not alone. I've seen some trees trying to push buds and daffodils coming out of the ground thinking it was spring. Grazing management in the fall prior to dormancy directly impacts the vigor and growth in the spring. How the plant is managed in the fall sets the stage for how it will respond next year. The buds/tillers and roots burn energy all winter and do so off of root reserves. If those root reserves are not sufficient, the plant weakens and then so does spring vigor and yield. In extremes, the plant can also die and will be noticed the next spring as a thinner stand of desired forages and an increase in undesirables such as weeds.

Allowing any green sprigs that appear to be grazed down this time of year, and especially ones that did not have any rest during the fall, is a situation that will weaken the stand, reduce vigor, and reduce spring yield. Ok, now I'll step down from the soapbox.

I've been asked the question, "When do the cool season grasses go dormant?" several times and honestly, I really don't have a good answer. Cool season forages can break dormancy in the spring with ground temperatures in the low 30's at two inches of depth. The soil above that is generally warmer. I used to say that three or four nights in a row in the 20's is usually enough to stop/kill top growth and force dormancy. If the weather stays cold or at least cool, it will remain dormant until it starts to grow in the spring. Unseasonably warm weather really messes with the plant. Truth is, as long as that plant is still growing at all, it's not dormant.

Now eventually we will get some real winter weather and a nice inch of fresh snow is ideal to frost-seed legumes into. I like it especially because I can see my tracks and know where I've been and get a better pattern with the seeder. One of these days I'm going to break down and buy a GPS system for the ATV so I know for sure I'm not missing spots or overlapping, but I haven't been able to justify it yet.

I normally talk about frost seeding or dormant seeding legumes between Christmas and Valentine's Day. I would hold off doing so until cold weather is here to stay. You don't want to take a chance on that seed sprouting right now and then not surviving. It's just better to wait a while...and for snowfall as a marker. Establishing legumes by frost-seeding into fields that potentially have been set back by prolonged grazing or pre dormant grazing will be advantageous. Better legumes than weeds, within reason. You can get too much clover. More on that next month.



*Clover can be seeded too thick and get too dense, especially when the existing grass stand has been weakened the previous fall. Sow less when competition is going to be reduced. Too much clover can mean serious bloat issues.*

As a reminder, I hope you were able to get those hay samples sent in. Hay should have been sampled in "lots" which would include hay harvested in different time frames, on different farms, and different forages. Samples should be collected using a forage probe and packaged up and send to a certified lab. Once you have the information back on your hay, you can match nutrient analysis to animal requirements and supplement as needed. Purdue Extension is always willing to help you figure out where shortfalls occur and how to balance those out. Energy is most commonly the factor that is lacking and it pays to know!

Hope to see you at one of the grazing conferences coming up. Keep on grazing!

## Reminders & Opportunities

**Heart of America Grazing Conference** – January 25-26, 2016, Lexington, KY. More information is available at: <https://www.uky.edu/Ag/Forage/2016%20HOA%20Brochure.pdf>

**Northern Indiana Grazing Conference** – February 5-6, 2016, Michiana Event Center, Howe, IN – Speakers include Gary Zimmer, Reggie Destree, David Schlabach, Jim Adkins and James Landis  
[http://www.lagrangeswcd.org/mgxroot/page\\_10791.html](http://www.lagrangeswcd.org/mgxroot/page_10791.html)



*Allan Nation, editor of The Stockman Grass Farmer Magazine, will be one of the speakers at the SIGC!*

**Southern Indiana Grazing Conference** – March 2, 2016, Crane, IN – Speakers include Allan Nation (Stockman Grass Farmer Magazine), Wesley Tucker, and Doug Peterson. For more information contact the Daviess County Soil and Water Conservation office at 812-254-4780, Ext 3, email Toni Allison [dc.swcd@daviess.org](mailto:dc.swcd@daviess.org), or visit <http://www.daviesscoswcd.org/index.php/sigc> or <https://www.facebook.com/SouthernIndianaGrazingConference>

More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/in/technical/landuse/pasture/>