

# Grazing Bites

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I'm writing this the last week of September. It is surprising how warm most of September was and even at the end of the month, even warm weather loving people were wondering how long this Indian summer will last. This type of weather, along with more than adequate moisture in a lot of the Indiana, means more opportunity and time to grow forage. Usually by this time of year, we are living on borrowed days if we are relying on a lot more forage growth. Too often, the first indications of winter weather are closing in by now, with the first frost just days away. As I walked along the pasture early this morning, it certainly didn't



seem like fall, even though the calendar tells me differently. I felt a slight glisten of sweat on my brow while at the same time listening to squirrels cutting really hard in nearby trees. Do they know something I don't know? I've mentioned some natural winter indicators in the past; but I won't go there today. I will say, that I'm usually wrong when I forecast what I think the winter will be like...so I'll predict that it will be very cold with a lot of snow!

It is somewhat understandable to see isolated hay fields still being cut for hay if they don't have the infrastructure for grazing. Quite a bit of that very late hay may not have enough yield to warrant baling it though. I'll not go to deep into the economics of it; but I do believe that most would agree that you need a fair amount of forage present to harvest before you can really truthfully justify taking that cutting. That is, of course, true anytime of the year, but perhaps even more important in the fall because you also need to consider that most forage species do overwinter better and will respond better the next spring if some residual is left behind. That residual is generally three or four inches for most grasses and at least six inches for alfalfa. With years like this one, you could easily have 15 inches or more of growth depending on when you cut it last. Cutting it now would cause the plant to continue to pull from root reserves and have potential to increase winter issues. Holding off until the plant goes dormant after the first hard freeze doesn't seem to jeopardize the plant as much if you have the conditions to dry it. Grasses react pretty much the same way. Waiting until they go dormant won't slow spring growth and you also maximize any potential growth. Like normal, I'm getting sidetracked like a rabbit dog on two hot trails.

No matter how much forage is present in a field, there is a fixed cost for the mowing, raking, and tedding if needed. The more yield or tonnage per acre, the less cost per bale or ton for the fixed costs. If a wheel is turning, you are spending money. The baling cost remains the same because it is normally figured on a per bale basis. The higher the yield, the more fixed costs are divvied up. I usually figure that it should yield at least two large round bales per acre to justify haying it to keep the actual cost per bale within reason, otherwise, you might be better off buying the hay instead and I didn't even mention nutrient removal. Small bales, if the quality is there, seem to be easier to absorb the extra costs, especially if you are selling some of it. Grazing it is still the best option if you have the infrastructure in place to do it under those lower yield circumstances.



*Tall Fescue is still the best forage to stockpile...*

I am totally amazed at how much growth there has been on pastures this fall. I think there is probably going to be some grass based fields this year that may get close to seven ton production. I realize that does not hold true for every part of Indiana, especially parts of the northeastern Indiana, but it has, for the most part, been an exceptional year. Most of the cool-season forages

did not have a dormant period this summer, and they never quit growing either...and neither did my yard.

There is more density to a lot of the stands this fall; rain does grow grass! One particular small hay field that I didn't think had much forage on it and even questioned if it was worth haying yielded over two and a half tons per acre in that cutting. A lot of the stockpiled forage this fall will be in that same category. There is more there than appears to be.

I sampled one paddock by doing a couple clippings. If you want a more accurate estimate, clip a known block (I use a 12 x 23 inch square made of rebar, that's 1.92ft<sup>2</sup>), dry it, weigh it in grams, and multiply that dry weight by 50 to get pounds per acre dry weight. The clippings indicated about 4,200 pounds per acre total forage. That is a lot of standing "hay" that will be some great grazing. Strip grazed, it will be more efficient than haying it.

It is a good time (like there is never a good time) to walk your pastures and do a quick evaluation. I would note what the dominant forage species are, how much legume is present, and any weed issues. Pastures that are dominantly orchardgrass, brome, or ryegrass should be grazed first and ideally after they have gone dormant (quit growing). When tall fescue is present, is the best to leave it for late fall and winter grazing because it holds its nutritional value the best. If fields are heavy in weeds, then it would be best to not graze those too tight this fall. One of our best ways to deter weeds in pastures is to maintain competition for them. We want those desirable forages to take off quickly next spring and compete with opportunist weeds. The more reserve they have in live plant above ground residual and roots, the quicker they will respond and provide that needed competition.

Some perennial weeds, especially if they have been clipped and are trying to regrow from stored reserves, could be sprayed and controlled if it is a real issue. The plant does need to still be actively growing to achieve the best results. If that perennial weed is still actively growing (regrowth), then the herbicide will have better results and more likely to get a good kill. Spot spraying, or if possible, using a rope wick type system will reduce the loss of good forbs and legumes that you want to keep.

Fall is usually a good time to check over fences and make sure everything is ready for winter. It is also a good time to take soil samples and see if your pastures need any nutrients. Soil samples can be taken until the ground freezes. Nutrients can be added and certainly lime can be added as well. If the pH is lower than 6.2, then you are starting to tie up nutrient availability and you will find it harder to maintain and establish clover. Even though it is usually best to apply any lime needed at least six months in advance of a new seeding of legumes or pasture in general, it is still better to apply than not apply if you will be frost-seeding any clover later in the winter.

I'm seeing more summer annual warm-season grasses; such as sudangrass or sorghum-sudangrass hybrids in and out of mixes being used for summer cover crops on fallow land. One of their many attributes is being quality feed. These can be grazed late in the summer and early fall providing large amounts of grazable forage if planted early enough and under good growing conditions. We do need to remember that sudangrass and sorghum-sudan hybrids, and johnsongrass produce a cyanide compound when frosted causing the production of the prussic acid. Livestock should be removed from these forages for at least two weeks to allow for the forages to "dry down" and the prussic acid to dissipate before grazing again. These forages can be harvested for balage right after being frosted and later fed as long as they are allowed their normal fermentation process time period of three or four weeks. Frosted areas could be only "pockets" in a field to start with. Any regrowth from the base of the plant after a frost can also be very high in prussic acid. If in doubt about nitrates or prussic acid – test before feeding or grazing!

I'd better get back to my fall work. Keep on grazing!

## *Reminders & Opportunities*

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/>