

Grazing Bites

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Winter is upon us. At least that is what the weatherman keeps saying. We have been blessed with really good fall conditions in most areas. Some areas could have benefited from a little bit more rain in October and early November, but for the most part, soil moisture levels were pretty good across Indiana. I am pleased with the fall forage growth and the amount of stockpiled forage. We have now seen cold enough temperatures, at least for the most part, to assume that we are now dealing with dormant forage.



If possible and practical, it is best to not start grazing stockpiled forage until it goes dormant. Until it goes dormant, every time that solar panel of leaves is removed, the plant will draw from the reserves in the roots. If you hurt those reserves too much, and you will set back spring growth. If you don't allow longer rest period in the spring to allow the plant to build back roots and reserves, you can really hurt your forage stand. There are times where grazing can be beneficial, such as for reducing competition early spring for frost seeded legumes. We will consider it dormant at this point.

If you are new to stockpiling, there are a few things to think about. It is usually best when first entering a field to give your livestock at least two or three days' worth of forage. You should start the grazing process on the end of the field with the water. You might be able to use a portable watering system for a while moving it along with the livestock, but that type of system gets challenging to keep from freezing. Back fencing is not nearly as important once the forages go dormant, so there is nothing really wrong with just utilizing water on one end of the field, as long as the walking distance and the time frame on the field doesn't create too much trailing.



Winter is coming, ready or not. Snow generally will not stop animals from grazing quality forage.

The allocation that you gave the livestock can now be grazed down to the desired residual height, ideally still 3 to 4 inches for most fescues and orchardgrass. Once the plants are at that desired stop grazing height, it is time to allocate more. To get the highest efficiency, daily allocations are best, but you can increase the amount as needed, especially if you are going to be gone a day or so.

These allocations are easy to do with temporary fence, especially if you are not back fencing. If you are back fencing, you need three sets which would include a reel, poly-wire, and enough step-in posts to complete a run across the field. If you are not back fencing, then two sets are best, but you can make it with just one. With two sets, you can have one in place, and move the second with less concern of the livestock moving faster than you do. If back fencing, the third fence is the back fence. Once the livestock are moved into the new allocation, the old back fence can be moved ahead of time for the next allocation. This is especially nice if you are fighting daylight or timing of that next move.

I prefer to keep things easy and also where I'm less likely to accidentally shock myself. Solid plastic handles on the end of the poly-wire means you can hang it on a hot or non-energized wire and it won't be "hot" until you make it hot. You then make it hot using jumper leads which look like little miniature jumper cables. It also helps to have a set of these per run also. While I'm still on the topic, I recommend buying quality poly-wire! The best poly-wire has eight or more strands of stainless steel strands in it. I'm not a fan of poly-tape, which is very similar, but usually ribbon-like and about a half inch wide. The tape is harder to keep taut and nearly impossible with ice or snow on it.



Electric fence jumper leads are perfect for use with poly-wire.

Strip grazing of stockpiled forage can be done on any size of field, but longer, more narrow fields are certainly the easiest to work with. When you are laying out new permanent fence divisions, consider this if you plan to do any stockpiling. My wife thinks that any run over 300 feet is too much when she has to fill in for me...so we have gone with more longer, narrower fields, and I have to admit I find it kind of nice too.

A step-in post with a smaller, yet strong steel tip and a foot peg for easy installation works the best for the frozen soil conditions that are ahead. When grazing heavier stockpile, you will find that the ground does not freeze much unless we get extended sub-zero temperatures creating a nice insulation blanket. Keep your choice of reels reasonably cheap at least to start with if you are going to be doing short runs. Longer runs make it easier to justify more expensive ones because of the gearing.

Good quality stockpile is usually tall fescue. Nothing stockpiles as well and holds its nutritional value longer through the winter as tall fescue. If you have stockpiled orchardgrass, use it first. Orchardgrass starts falling apart fairly quickly and has little value as winter progresses. Quality stockpiled tall fescue quite often has better feed values than a lot of hay that is fed at the same time.

Unless you are still grazing fall-planted winter annuals with corn stalks, a lot of the value of corn stalks has been depleted by now and continuing to graze them will mean supplementation will probably be required. Sorghum-sudangrass has been frozen and dried off two or three weeks by now and could provide some grazing opportunities if still present. If you have ample stockpile of corn residues and annuals to continue grazing until the end of the year then you are already more efficient than most livestock producers; good job.

I've been asked numerous times lately about buying cows. Is now a good time to increase the cow herd? I can't really answer this question because I can't predict the future market, but I'm hoping this softened price trend will flatten off. If inputs are kept in check and the operation was not created or increased on the inflated market, then you are probably still in the game and profit is certainly possible. The higher cattle prices of the last five years were a nice blessing, but in reality, not sustainable long-term. We might complain about current prices, but honestly, they are still better than in the past. Only time will tell where prices go from here and how current events might influence them. Livestock producers just have to go back to one thing that they can control and that's inputs, especially with cow costs. You are usually better off, even when prices are high, to operate with an input level that works with lower prices. It would still pay to consider culling as needed and stick to the adage of "buy low and sell high."

Keep warm and keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

Heart of America Grazing Conference – January 18-19, 2017, Quincy, IL. Ray Archuleta and Dr. Allen Williams are two of the speakers. More information is available at: <http://illinoisbeef.com>

Northern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 3-4, 2017 at the Michiana Event Center, Howe, IN. Early registration will be accepted until January 27. For more information about the NIGC or to get a registration form, please call the LaGrange County Soil & Water Conservation District office at 260-463-3471 extension 3.

Southern Indiana Grazing Conference (SIGC) – March 8, 2017, Crane, IN – Speakers include Darin Williams, Joshua Dukart, and Teddy Gentry. 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, or visit <http://www.daviesscoswcd.org/index.php/sigc> or <https://www.facebook.com/SouthernIndianaGrazingConference>

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