

Grazing Bites

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In quite a bit of the state, snow flurries or not, some new green growth is trying to show. It is still a bit early and any new growth in the pastures does not mean letting the livestock have at it ...let's think this through. Grazing too early in the spring does nothing but remove that solar panel needed by the plants to build new reserves, grow new roots, and more leaf. The forages really need to be able to canopy and get a good start before animals start removing the top canopy otherwise production will be reduced.



Sometimes hay supplies are short. Sometimes the hay is not the best quality. However, it is better to supplement poor hay and keep feeding it, if available, than to start grazing too early...now I say that somewhat tongue in cheek. Sometimes you want to set the stand back a bit to remove some competition. Such would be the case where you have frost seeded clover into the field. This would only be a factor if it was not grazed down tighter at the end of the previous grazing season or as dormant stockpiled forage. If it was grazed down close before, especially if before going dormant last fall, then you don't want to graze it close again, just utilize it in the normal rotation.

No, not ready to graze yet...the forages first need to rebuild the solar panel!

Fields that were grazed down tight last fall or over winter as stockpiled forage will not have adequate standing dry matter...fiber available and will for sure not be the best fields to start grazing early anyway. Those fields will lack sufficient fiber to go with all the washy high water, high-protein forage that will come on with first growth. All ruminant livestock need to balance the carbon nitrogen ratio in their rumen to maintain that mat. If they don't then they will not perform the way we want them to, i.e., less weight gain, less milk production. It just goes through them faster than they can effectively utilize it and you know what means...don't stand too close behind those cows! You've heard me say that several times before. If you don't believe me, well, it is your washing machine.

If you would look at the manure consistency during that time period, it could be very thin, almost watery, and not that pudding consistency that is ideal for the rumen. Fields that do not have adequate dry matter to go along with lush new growth will need to be supplemented to keep the animals in balance. This is a good time to put out some low quality hay, baled corn stalks or even straw; if they need it, they will eat it.

I would hope you have been able to keep at least one or two fields with some stockpiled forage for early spring use. Stockpiled forages left from the previous season mixed with new growth grass makes for a nicely balanced sward for grazing in the spring and a really nice place to calve. This provides no or minimal mud and good quality balanced forage to eat. If you have never tried it, you will wonder why you haven't afterwards.

Now is a good time to get those soil tests done. Of course, if you haven't taken any for a while, then it is even a better time. The soil will pull pretty easy right now and you should have plenty of time to get the sample sent in and get results back in time to apply any needed nutrients before the real growing season.

It is extremely difficult to maintain a stand of quality forages that will produce quality, nutritious feed without adequate soil fertility levels. Everyone has tried it, but you soon see that by “getting by” with lower levels of nutrients, especially phosphorus and potassium, you are doing just that, “getting by,” but with lower yields, lower quality forages, and lower carrying capacities. Just like an annual field crop, your forage crop needs to be fertilized and managed.

Nothing affects availability of nutrients more than calcium. It is one element that I’m not sure you really could ever over apply and certainly one of the best first dollars spent! Calcium and its relationship or ratio with magnesium, have a major impact on the forages ability to extract nutrients from the soil and certainly the acidity or alkalinity of the soil which can dictate what will or can grow there. You should shoot for at least a 4:1 ratio of calcium to magnesium, or 5:1 if a dairy. If you are really short on calcium and start fixing that problem then you might find out that other elements start becoming more readily available. I’ve seen available phosphorus almost double after lime was applied or especially high-cal lime. If total phosphorus is a lot higher than available phosphorus on a basic soil test, then calcium is normally not adequate.

Though I really think that lime is best applied in the fall to allow plenty of time over winter for it to break down some, if you are really short, it is best to go ahead and apply some, preferably prior to new spring growth. Fall is also usually drier and lessens the chance of causing compaction from heavy equipment.

I think it is a good idea to probably test for sulfur also. This is usually an additional test but worth the few extra dollars to find out if it is sufficient or not. A tissue test is better than a soil test in this case. Sulfur is an important constituent of protein and is also important for plant stress resistance. Plants tend to be stunted, pale, and yellow-green. Once sulfur is made available, it remains fairly stable in pastures. It is more likely deficient on sandy soils and low organic matter soils and usually first seen in legumes.

If you are going to be taking an early cutting of hay off a field, then putting all of your fertilizer on early spring is not too bad an idea; especially nitrogen. If the application is on pasture, then you may want to rethink that just a little. There is no use adding fuel to the fire by adding a lot of nitrogen to that spring growth spurt. You are much better off waiting and do at least a split application. Put half of it on in mid-June toward the end of the spring spurt and the other half on early fall to help that great fall growth period. That June application often will help you keep things going better through the summer ...especially with some timely rains...if that is possible. Ideally, if you are in a good rotation, consider applying some fertilizer after every second grazing as long as you are in a building phase. If adequate, then little or no extra fertility may be needed, especially if you have adequate legume in the stand, something along the line of 35-40% by dry weight.

As always, 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/>