

Grazing Bites

100th Issue

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There is new life and activity everywhere; you just have to love spring! Pastures are about as green as they can get this time of year and the grass seems to be growing right before your eyes. Most of our cool season forages are starting the peak portion of their growth curve right now. They can grow so fast during this period that you barely can keep them under control.

When forages are growing fast, you need to rotate the livestock fast. When the forage growth slows down, rotate the livestock slower. Early in the growing season, your main goal should be to maintain as much forage as possible in a vegetative state. Top grazing pastures (removing just the upper portion of the plant) is a good way to flatten that growth curve a little bit. You want to maintain a more vegetative stage because that is quality forage for animal growth and lactation. I consider this stage two growth, the best balance of protein and energy.



Spring grazing. Photo by Jim Fiedler

New short grass (stage one) tends to be too high in nitrogen (protein). Maturing plants (stage three) have lost quite a bit of their protein and eventually energy, and tend to have more bulk than quality. Most cool season forages hit their ideal nutritional values in the stage two timeframe, but it can be difficult to maintain there.

It can be done with grazing, but you have to be diligent. If you have no issue at all keeping forages in a vegetative stage, then either you are a better manager than me **or** you have too many animals. If you have enough animals to keep the spring peak growth under control, unless you reduce numbers after that flush, you will probably find yourself short of forage later on as plant growth really slows down. I would rather have too much forage any day than not enough.

By rotating faster in the spring during peak growth, you can flatten out that growth curve slightly. This helps to extend that more ideal forage quality. If it is still getting ahead of you, then clipping as high as possible at very early seed head production can also prolong and promote better quality forage.

If a field or area is a poorer site (lack of fertility, lack of vigor, lower organic matter) and you have to skip an area, this would be the place to do it. Maturing plants have deeper root systems which will add to the health of the soil, provide some healing, pull nutrients from deeper in the profile, and could be strip-grazed later letting the livestock eat the best and leave the rest to help restore the site.

Haying it to control growth has its cost. Nutrient removal, reduced plant diversity and reduced infiltration of rain water due to increased runoff can all take their toll on summer growth potential. I have watched producers cut everything for hay while feeding the cows hay the whole time. If the cows can be grazing, then the cows should be grazing; enough said.

Keep animals moving from pasture to pasture to prevent them from grazing too closely; maintain stop grazing heights of at least four inches. Those heights will be **more** than four inches if top grazing.

It is not a bad idea to plant a small amount of acreage with some summer annuals. These forages, if started in time and with sufficient moisture at planting, can certainly be a lifesaver later in the summer. Brassicas and warm-season grass annuals work well. This planting could be a monoculture or better yet a mixture of things. What quickly comes to mind includes most millets (Proso, Japanese, German, Pearl), sudangrass, cow peas, turnips, radishes, and sorghum x sudangrass (BMR). I think a mix is best because it adds a lot of diversity and new microorganisms to the soil to improve it, and balances the protein to fiber better. A diverse mixture of annuals planted before converting cropland to forages, especially warm season grasses, helps to enrich the soil and speeds establishment and provides some pretty nice extra forage.

Beware of poison hemlock. It is becoming more and more common along roads and some fields. All parts of this plant are poisonous when ingested by livestock. It is a biennial, producing only a rosette the first year and then flowers and seed the second year. It is very prolific. It looks a little like a wild parsnip, but will have purplish blotches on the stem. Consult your local extension office for control methods.

I've been asked what inspires me to continue to write this newsletter. I look at it as a "friendly reminder" of things to be thinking about or a "heads up" to what is presently going on or coming up in the grazing scene. I believe in being service oriented. I strive to provide accurate and timely information that will build sustainability into all types and sizes of grazing livestock operations. I hope that some of you will go beyond just being sustainable and strive to increase forage production. The world population is not getting any smaller, and pasture, range, and cropland **have** to become more productive to meet future needs while decreasing in acres at the same time. We cannot continue to degrade our natural resources in the process.



Poison Hemlock is poisonous to livestock.

I've also been asked, "Why keep grazing livestock?" The first answer is, "because someone has to," but it goes way beyond that. Grazing livestock is good for the land and, good for the soil. Livestock provides a healthy product for consumers and it is just something that runs in the blood of a lot of us. I can't imagine not being around a few cows or other grazing animals. There is just something oddly soothing about watching livestock quietly and gracefully grazing on a cool summer morning or viewing the first view of a new born calf.

This is the 100th issue of Grazing Bites. I have never asked before, but if you have any comments on the newsletter I'd love to hear from you. You can email me at victor.shelton@in.usda.gov.

Enjoy your spring, and keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

Howard County Pasture Walk – June 7th – Contact the Howard County SWCD for more information.

Eastern Native Grass Symposium – August 29-31 – Tropicana at Evansville, IN. More information coming.

Purdue Forage Management Workshop – September 7th – Purdue Agronomy Farm. For more information go to: <https://ag.purdue.edu/agry/dtc/Pages/forage.aspx>

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/>