

# Grazing Bites

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Victor Shelton, NRCS State Agronomist/Grazing Specialist

It would be nice some year to have an average spring; trouble is, I'm not sure what that is anymore. I've seen a fair amount of hay being cut; some has gone through several wash cycles. I think every producer stresses over making hay, at least part of the time. I'd rather leave the forage standing than have poor quality hay.

Let's ponder two questions in this issue, "To bale or not bale?" and "Should I put up hay or just buy what I need?" I think everyone, no matter how efficient or type of grazing system, should have some hay on hand. It is your insurance plan; one of your contingency plans. Feeding less hay is a good thing though, at least it should be – meaning that you are hopefully grazing more.

Smaller operations, especially ones with less than 15 cows or equivalents would have difficult time justifying owning hay equipment. That depreciating investment would probably be best spent on improving the grazing efficiency of the farm or on fertility. I have to be careful here not to step on toes, but I've seen people buying a lot of hay equipment so they can stop buying hay and perhaps even "sell" some hay. While they really could have gotten away from using very little hay, they have spent their money on iron and then often mine their soils to help pay for that equipment...can you really sell that hay for enough to replace the nutrients and pay for labor and equipment? Not likely.



*Rolling up nutrients. Photo by Victor Shelton*

If you are in what I will refer to as a "building" stage of soil fertility – in other words, it still needs some, then you would be better off bringing in fertility, i.e., hay, than to remove it. This is true even if you are not selling it and utilizing it yourself. You are still most likely removing nutrients from where they are needed and moving them to a "feeding" area where they are already high. Moving those "feeding" areas around some will certainly help, but still the more you can graze, the better.

If fields are in that "building" stage, it is counterproductive to cut hay off it – no question. You are just removing and moving needed nutrients – especially phosphorus. Let's look at the cost for just a moment and compare it to grazing. If you look at nutrient removal between the two scenarios – grazing an orchardgrass/clover mix pasture or haying this same field...assuming the nutrients are actually present; the grazing cost of nutrient removal is about \$2.50 per ton dry matter produced. Hay cost from nutrient removal with the same nutrient values is about \$40 per ton assuming that no or minimal nitrogen was applied and most nitrogen was supplied by the legume. So my question is, do you still want to cut hay off that field? Smaller operations are almost always better off buying what hay they need. You don't have to fight the weather and you can actually shop around and buy good quality hay – often cheaper than you can raise it.

Except for some drought years, there is usually hay around to be bought. Plan ahead if you are going to be buying and if possible, visit the hayfield from which your hay will come ahead of time so you have a better idea of the quality. If purchasing hay already baled or sight unseen, request a hay analysis to make sure it is the quality needed to meet your livestock's nutritional needs just to make sure it really will beat "snowballs." If you are cutting hay, don't forget to get a soil test at least every 2-3 years and re-apply needed nutrients to grow more quality forage.

That's enough on hay.

I've had several questions on mowing heights or clipping heights for pasture. Most tall cool-season grasses like tall fescues and orchardgrass would ideally be clipped right at leaf height removing present or emerging seed stems. If these have been grazed in a manner where the stand is very uneven, then mowing slightly lower might in order to help to even out the stand and encourage under-grazed areas. Perennial ryegrass and bluegrass would benefit from similar conditions, but of course will be shorter than the previously mentioned species to be best. Warm season grasses such as switchgrass or big bluestem should not need to be clipped this time of year.

I have to ask the question though, what is the reason for your mowing? If it is to improve or maintain quality – have at it – just don't mow any shorter than necessary. If it is purely for aesthetics – you might be better off leaving it alone. Taller forages produce more live roots providing some drought insurance; can help to shade out some weeds; can provide for slightly cooler soils and maintain moisture which can promote more growth from cool season forages instead of less desirable plants and then the added benefit of some wildlife habitat.

Fast grazing over a paddock while the seed heads are still in the milk stage or at least still green can top these paddocks just about as good and if you tread some forage into the ground in the process, that's okay too, it will be used to grow more and adds carbon to the soil. Quality is lost as the plant matures, but a few seed heads are not that bad; cutting too short and then having the weather turn hot and dry is typically worse. If you are going to clip, clip early and as high as possible! You mainly want to just remove seed heads and leave the solar panel (leaves). There are certainly more benefits gained from clipping early than later.

Recently, my wife and I went through a major life altering event. It has really made me stop and think about time lost over the years doing things that I thought were important at the moment, but could have waited or totally been ignored. We sometimes work harder than we need to. Hay, quite often, falls into this category. Cows have four feet drive, a built in harvester and manure spreader; we need to take more advantage of this.

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](mailto:victor.shelton@in.usda.gov).

Don't get carried away with the hay, and keep on grazing!

## ***Reminders & Opportunities***

**Howard County Pasture Walk – June 7<sup>th</sup>** – Contact the Howard County SWCD for more information.

**Pasture Plant ID & Grazing Management Workshop – June 28<sup>th</sup>** - 9:30AM - 2:30PM EDT, Feldun Purdue Agricultural Center, Registration and Information: <http://pastureandgrazingworkshop.eventbrite.com>

**Pasture Field Day – August 20<sup>th</sup>** – Rising Sun, IN – Contact the Dearborn County SWCD for more information and register by August 15<sup>th</sup> by calling 812-926-2406 Ext 3. (Lunch provided)

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

**Purdue Forage Management Workshop – September 7<sup>th</sup> – 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/>