

THE FORAGER

Agronomics with livestock in mind!

Forage or Livestock Management Approaches

Many producers utilize grazing as a means of providing livestock with sufficient forage. This may include heifers, dry/transition cows, and sometimes lactation cows. With this in mind, here are some considerations that can help to better ensure grazing livestock meet their nutritional needs, when this method of feeding is incorporated into any program.

Good grazing management yields numerous benefits, including several that deserve mention here. First, when pastures are grazed appropriately for the forage species they contain, the plants will be healthier and more productive over a longer period of time, reducing the need for other strategies. Grazing plants too closely will slow re-growth, resulting in lower yields and weakened plants due to a depletion of food reserves. Some forage is particularly sensitive to this type of damage. Healthy plants with good root systems are less likely to be impacted by drought and other stresses than plants that have been weakened by overgrazing.

Good grazing management also reduces forage waste. If pastures are under-grazed at certain times, losses due to trampling and fouling of forage can be substantial. With appropriate grazing management, losses can be reduced 20-30%, which can in turn lengthen the grazing period. These include such things as a) limit grazing to a few hours at a time; b) strip grazing, rather than opening entire fields to livestock at any given time; c) forward grazing – which gives animals with higher nutritional requirements the opportunity to graze first; and d) rotational grazing – rotating animals among pastures and paddocks. Rotational grazing may allow for grazing to begin earlier in the growing season while staying within the realm of good grazing forage management. This is because removing livestock from an early-grazed pasture allows the grass to rest before being grazed again. Since the first pastures grazed are likely to be slower to recover, this rotational approach may also help to avoid excess growth that often occurs during the spring flush. Shorter rotation intervals tend to result in better forage re-growth over the growing season, as long as pastures are not grazed more closely than recommended for the species they contain.

Grazing management can also help ensure that nutritional needs of animals are met. For example, creep grazing allows young animals a chance to obtain a more nutritious

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diet than their mothers; forward grazing allows groups of animals grazed in sequence to consume forage of differing quality levels; and limited grazing a high-quality pasture (perhaps two or three hours each day) can provide excellent dietary supplementation.

As grazing management is intensified, there is usually more even distribution of dung, urine, and therefore of recycled nutrients. This tends to ultimately reduce fertilizer needs, increase the efficiency of fertilizer applications, and keep pastures growing for longer periods of time. Caution may be needed when wet soil conditions exist, since a concentration of animals may create extremely muddy conditions and result in a great deal of pasture damage. A “sacrifice” paddock that can be reseeded later may be justifiable for these situations.

Research studies have shown excellent calf gain per acre, as well as a reduction in other forages required by adult animals with the practice of rotational grazing (Hoveland, U of GA). Other research has shown advantages to strip-grazing, with the potential of increasing stocking rates (Gerrish, U of MO).

If forage sources are tight and grazing is an option, these management techniques can help to make a difference in both productivity and bottom line profitability.

(Edited from an article EXTENDING GRAZING & REDUCING STORED FORAGE FEED NEEDS, a compilation by Ball, Ballard, Kennedy, Lacefield and Undersander - 2008)

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