

Grazing Bites



November 2018

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I mentioned last month that there are still plenty of good growing days left this fall and they need to be taken advantage of. One of the first things to do to make sure you obtain as much plant growth as possible, especially with perennial forages, is to stop grazing forages that will continue to grow for a while, especially forages that will stockpile like tall fescue. Now, I don't think anyone would've predicted it would be almost 70 degrees the day before Halloween. I remember quite well going Trick-or-Treating as a kid with snow on the ground a few times. It's not the same weather pattern these days, that's for sure.



Quality looking fall forage waiting to go dormant. Once dormant it can be grazed with less harm to energy reserves.

Whether you believe in global warming or not is a deeper subject than I really want to get into in one of these articles, but it's not hard to see though that we are in a warmer trend than four or five decades ago. I read an article recently that showed photos of cycling races over several decades. Clips from the 1980's showed trees with bare to pretty much leaf-less limbs. Most recent photos showed trees covered with leaves and spring flowers. Pictures don't lie.

You want to plan for how to adapt for changes in weather. Keeping as many options open as possible for grazing is a good place to start, but you also want to make sure you have a good contingency plan too. Last spring caught a lot of people off guard. No one could have predicted that we would have such wet conditions in February, nor such a delay in forage growth. Thank goodness for hay reserves.

Extra forage should be part of that contingency plan. With a few extra growing days prior to killing frost, you should be maximizing as much growth as possible for as long as possible prior to grazing it. A killing frost is typically two or more nights in a row at 25 degrees or lower, which is enough of a cold spell to force the plants into dormancy. Once dormant, they can be grazed with less harm to energy reserves. But remember, forage plants are the most sensitive to grazing in the fall. That is why I usually promote the use of annuals or crop residue, or ideally the combination of the two in the early fall. It allows the pastures to recuperate and build reserves.

If you don't have annuals or crop residues to graze, then you always have the option of feeding hay for a while and then going back to grazing. I know that this sounds crazy to some people. Why would I feed hay when I still have grass that I can graze? Two reasons. Number one, you don't want to hurt plant reserves impacting the stand for next year's growth. Number two, you can potentially gain a lot more growth if moisture and fertility is in check with the increasing green solar panel.

There are times or situations when grazing prior to dormancy or a killing frost is what is needed. If you want to suppress spring growth, then grazing hard prior to dormancy can be beneficial. If you are frost-seeding clover into the field later this winter, this suppression of the grasses in the spring provides a longer window for the clover to grow and become established due to reducing the competition of the existing perennial grasses. I've also found that fields that have become dominantly grass, especially a monoculture of tall fescue, can be grazed fairly hard prior to early fall pre-dormancy and, if a good seed bank is present, you can have increased diversity.

Before I go on I do want say that you can have a positive impact on weather and it doesn't include any rain dances. Weather can be impacted by soil moisture and carbon. You can help do your part by keeping the ground covered, keeping soil disturbance to a minimum, and by keeping something growing on it all the time, which is helping to bank moisture and carbon. It has been said that we could reverse almost all of the damage by just increasing soil organic matter on crop fields by one percent and returning excess atmospheric carbon to the terrestrial sink. Food for thought.

I just mentioned in another article I was writing about how many phone calls I've received asking about taking one more cutting of hay. Okay, the weather has been pretty nice at times, but it is November! The desire for just one more cutting of hay this season tempts even the best producers. Remember that regrowth comes from energy reserves in the plant's roots. Generally, you need at least five to six weeks of regrowth after the last cutting to allow for rebuilding those energy reserves. If you must cut it, then it's best to wait until after at least one or two killing frosts after the plant is dormant. The same would be true if you decided to graze it.

Like I mentioned earlier, feeding hay right now might still be your best option until you have had sufficient killing frosts. It will help set the stage for maintaining root reserves and faster growing forages next spring and it will buy you more growing days until the plants are truly dormant. Remember, as long as plants are not dormant, they will continue to grow if there is sufficient moisture and nutrients and then once they go dormant, it is basically standing hay. Allocate it out wisely. The longer it lasts, the longer you will continue to graze and leave the tractor in the shed.

I highly recommend strip grazing the stockpiled forage once you start grazing it. Three sets of reels with poly-wire on them, a sufficient number of step-in posts and connectors and you are in business. You generally want three sets. One set for that first break wire. The second set is for a back fence if needed. If you do not have portable water, then they may have to walk over where they have been to get to the water. If this is the case, start on the water end of the paddock. The third set is for the next day's move and it's always better to have that set up ahead of time. Nothing like a group of impatient hungry cows complaining that you aren't moving fast enough setting up that new fence. If you already have it set up and just have to open it up to them then they won't care how long it takes you to move it for the next day.

Take advantage of the forage you have and keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

- **7th National Grazing Lands Conference** – December 2-5, 2018, Reno, Nevada. “Take the Gamble Out of Grazing”
- **2019 American Forage and Grazing Council Annual Conference and 75th Anniversary** — January 6-9, 2019, St. Louis, MO, Hyatt Regency at the Arch. Conference theme is “Forages Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.”
- **2019 Heart of America Grazing Conference** — January 22-23, 2019, Ferdinand Community Center, Ferdinand, Indiana
- **Northern Indiana Grazing Conference (NIGC)** – February 1-2, 2019, Michiana Event Center (new location) 4405 E Farver St., Shipshewana, IN. 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 6, 2019, Crane, IN – Speakers include Greg Judy, Darby Simpson, and Peter Allen. 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>
- 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/>

