

Grazing Bites

July 2019

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I find it hard to believe that it is already July. I was beginning to think we were stuck in April showers. I generally think of the 4th of July as the beginning of the second half of summer, but this year it seems more like the beginning. There is also a limited amount of corn that is knee-high. It's an odd year, no one will argue with you about that.

There was finally a long enough break between rains for a lot of hay to get laid down in most of the state. That didn't mean there were not challenges getting it dried. Some soils were so saturated that you would see wet tires cutting hay. When there is that much water on the soil surface and upper horizon, it's hard to dry hay. Cutting the hay just a bit higher than normal and then tedding it can help. That little bit of extra height helps with air flow.



Saturated soils with little cover create opportunities for weeds and lost production.

Pastures have also been a challenge. I've walked across several pastures recently that had water literally standing on them. I've had some almost that saturated. Even with huge amounts of forage present, anywhere cows traveled more than once, especially multiple times, was subject to pugging. You generally don't have to worry about pugging this time of year. It's always better to try and find something positive in a situation if at all possible, or as my wife points out, "There's no use complaining, when handed a bunch of lemons, make lemonade." In a very anecdotal thought, one might hope that with fast regrowth of forages and their roots, compaction might be less of an issue and those divots can catch runoff and forage seed which would have some value. In fields with a lot of forage present, carbon from the forages and anything else growing out there, when trampled into the ground, is putting that excess material right at the soil surface where it can be broken down quicker and help feed future forage.

I've been very tempted to hay some long-term grazing-only paddocks just to gain a little extra control and to be able to squirrel away a little extra hay. It's probably been over 20 years since some of these have been hayed and the density, diversity of plants, soil organic matter, and yield has done nothing but increase. I couldn't do it, I had to leave it be and walk the talk. I don't like moving nutrients out of a field, and because of the wet soils, I really didn't want to get tractors out there adding even more compaction. If it decided to turn dry, I would be disappointed in my decision. I'll keep my hay fields, hay fields and pasture, pasture.

The one field that I was most tempted by was probably best left alone. It had extremely dense, heavy forage that would have been challenging to get dry, especially when it should've been cut, and I would have been sick if it was a wash. That field has yet to be grazed this year. Ordinarily this would have created a quality issue and it would have to be grazed in a strip grazing fashion with more benefit to soil health than livestock satisfaction. There is certainly more mature forage in that field than preferred, but there is also a huge amount of very lush green forage beneath it that is still very good quality. The extended cooler weather (until lately) and the excess moisture has maintained forage quality and animals grazing those forages show the benefits.

My wife mentioned recently that we should be appreciative for the excess forage. "We have more grass to stockpile and sure as shooting we're due a dry spell and we'll be glad we have it." She is right. I think she has been actually listening to me!

Keeping those animals moving is a good idea this summer, especially as wet as some fields still are. This is best done by strip grazing across the fields allocating out enough to meet the livestock needs and, of course, to help

maintain that solar panel. When grazing under wet conditions, don't concentrate the animals too much. Bigger allotments and less time spent on them is what is going to work the best. Concentrating them too much or leaving them there too long will yield a field that looks more like it's been plowed than grazed. Severely damaged pastures from pugging or "plowing" by hooves, can really set back forage potential and open up the field for opportunist weeds, most that you would not want to get a foot hold again such as cocklebur, prickly pigweed, and ragweed.

Back to hay. Quite a bit of early hay was not able to be cut when it was the best quality. That is a problem to some degree every year, but more so this year because of the rain and wet conditions. With ample moisture, it should be a good year to fertilize those hay fields after the first cutting to boost the quality and quantity of a possible second cutting. There may be a shortage of quality hay this year.

Hay certainly isn't the only crop to struggle this year. Corn and soybean fields were late getting planted and some not at all. Prevented planting acres can be planted to annuals and can serve several purposes. Those annuals will help deter weeds once established, help boost soil health by keeping the soil covered with green growing plants, provide diversity, and maintain reduced soil disturbance if no-tilled into the soil. Soil health can also be boosted by the integration of grazing livestock which some call the fifth soil health principle.

If you have crop insurance, you want to make sure to talk to your insurance agent or Risk Management Agency (RMA) prior to planting or utilizing any cover crops or annuals planted on prevented planting acres. Only for 2019, RMA has moved the date from which cover crops or annuals can be utilized for grazing or forage from November 1st to September 1st. This move is a great opportunity for producers with grazing livestock.

Summer annuals can be planted now and harvested or grazed after September 1st. These can include sorghum-sudan, sudangrass, millets, cowpeas, teff, and a few other summer annuals. Please note that some of these species have a short supply of seed this year. RMA has recently opened up the possibility of cash crops to be used for summer cover crops, if desired. Consult your crop insurance agent before doing anything. You do not want to jeopardize your crop insurance.

You may want to plan ahead and get fall seeded annuals planted early. Most of the common fall-seeded, cool season annuals can be planted as soon as early August. It might also pay to have seed in your possession ahead of time. My favorite mix is still spring oats, a brassica such as radish, rape, or turnips, and cereal rye. The oats will grow fast with ample moisture, yield well and can make some very decent hay or grazing throughout the fall. The brassica is a nice component and readily consumed by most grazing livestock. The cereal rye will come on stronger later and will overwinter and provide good cover for the next growing season and perhaps even some early spring grazing if soil conditions are favorable. Other fall seeded options would include triticale, wheat, and barley. Crimson clover and brassicas can be added to any of these.

If you have cover crops planned under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), these can also be grazed or hayed as long as the planned purpose(s) are not compromised, and the planned resource concern is met. Grazing or forage is not a primary purpose of NRCS cover crops. Cover crops planted on prevented planting acres and EQIP cover crops can not be harvested for grain under any circumstances.

For more information about grazing or harvesting forage on EQIP funded cover crops, mixes and seeding rates for prevented planting options, contact your local NRCS office.

Keep a positive attitude and keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

- Conservation Cropping Systems Initiative 2019 compiled information: <http://ccsin.iaswcd.org/conservation-practices/prevented-planting-tools/>
- More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/in/technical/landuse/pasture/>