# Grazing Bites

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The Old Farmer's Almanac has released their forecast for this winter. "Mild, with soakers" is how Indiana is labeled. I don't put a lot of weight on these forecasts, but they often line up with other forecasts and occasionally are completely correct. If this forecast holds true, I think we all need to prepare for a winter similar to last year.


*Whether winter predictions are correct or not, it's time to start preparing!*

This past winter, I kept hoping for some free concrete—frozen ground. I only had about a dozen days and that's not enough. To add true misery for both me and the livestock, it seemed to rain every two or three days, picking up momentum as we got closer to spring.

I don't like to see pastures or crop fields torn up. Grazing under wet conditions is bad enough during the growing season, but it's an absolutely painful sight during the dormant season because you know it's going to be a while before it looks better! I might even wish for a little snow to cover it up.

Most of us bank on dry or frozen ground for grazing stockpiled forage, and especially when you are grazing corn residue and or winter annuals. You don't want compaction, but the wetter it is, the higher the possibility. Roots from cover crops and the freezing and thawing process can relieve some of this, but it does have to freeze to get all the benefits!

So, what can you do to prepare for the possibility of another long, wet muddy winter? All livestock producers need a contingency plan for both summer and winter. First, look at your animal numbers. My advice is that ten percent of the herd should probably grow some wheels every year. You're probably holding back some replacement heifers to maintain numbers anyway. As the late Gearld Fry would wisely say, "If you cull the ten percent you should be culling, the herd that's left is just that much better." A few open fat cows going down the road reduces winter feed needs and lighter cows will also do slightly less damage to the ground under wet conditions.

Second, just as there is a need for a dry lot in the summer during a drought to protect the pasture, a "winterized" dry lot is needed, especially in wet winters. Winter feeding areas are an absolute must for at least part of the season. Why? Because mud costs money. Livestock burn more energy in mud just by moving around. Increased energy needs increase your feed and feed costs. Feeding efficiently becomes more challenging and losses of hay and feed go up.

For this part of your contingency plan, I highly recommend a rock pad or Heavy Use Area Protection (HUAP) site. A HUAP site can be a huge blessing under wet conditions. After last winter, my wife declared we needed a whole lot more of them! (When you are five feet tall and sink down a foot into the mud, the cows look a whole lot bigger, or so she claims!)

I would much rather be feeding hay out on the pasture, unrolling it to spread out the hooves and nutrients, but when the ground is totally saturated, it's just a muddy mess. I don't like having to deal with the manure and leftovers the next spring, but I also don't like to see pastures torn up and what it creates, which includes a grand opportunity for weeds in the spring.

Hay rings and hay feed wagons work much better on these rock pads. Without HUAP sites, and under wet conditions, the ground quickly becomes a deep mud soup around them and moving them becomes increasingly challenging. Without a pad, it is probably better to not use rings, but then waste goes up extravagantly.

Fence-line feeders surrounded with rock pads are an efficient way to feed all year round. They are usually designed with one side of the slanted feeding panel area open, so you can back in bales without needing to get in with the cows. You can almost feed hay in your Sunday best. You and the tractor stay away from the cows, no gate battling, and if your hay storage is nearby, life is good.

You may qualify for financial assistance to install a HUAP site through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service district conservationist for more information. With or without cost-share, winter feeding pads are a good investment and are pretty simple to build. Locate and build them away from water bodies and where you can have easy access and good drainage and you'll be ready for whatever winter brings.

You're starting to run low on time to get fall annuals planted. The earlier they are seeded the more growth and grazing potential they will provide. My favorite mix is spring oats, a brassica such as radish, rape, or turnips, and cereal rye. The oats grow fast with ample moisture, yield well and can make some very decent hay or grazing throughout the fall. The brassica is a nice addition and is 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. These annuals can help improve soil health, build organic matter, reduce some weeds, and be forage too. Other fall-seeded options would include crimson clover, winter peas, triticale, wheat, barley or multiple combinations. You can't graze it if you don't plant it.

For those of you with prevented planting acres this year, cover crops can be grazed after September 1st. Make sure to consult your crop insurance agent before doing anything. You do not want to jeopardize your crop insurance. If you have cover crops planned under EQIP, these can also be grazed or hayed as long as the planned purpose(s) is 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 cannot 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.

Last on your list is to start assessing your winter feeding needs and supply now. Consider how much livestock will be overwintering, how much they will be consuming, and what they will be eating. Fall pasture, stockpiled forages, crop residues and annuals, and stored feed, such as hay, silage, or balage, should all be accounted for.

If you haven't started stockpiling any forage yet, now is the time to do so. Tall fescue stockpiles better than any other forage which is one of its best attributes. It holds quality longer than almost any other perennial forage. Grazing annuals or cover crops now will provide additional rest and growth for perennial pastures which can be then be grazed later this winter.

I really don't want to think about winter yet, but it's best to be prepared. Keep on grazing!

**Reminders & Opportunities**

- **Heart of America Grazing Conference** – October 29-30, 2019 – Burlington, KY – Keynote speaker is Jim Gerrish "Kicking the Hay Habit: Optimizing Profitability" – for more information go to https://www.eventbrite.com/e/heart-of-america-grazing-conference-tickets-63447647622?mc_eid=9342c2521a&mc_cid=ca2d7b61fb
- More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/in/technical/landuse/pasture/