Grazing Bites

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I've heard several people mentioning lately that they are glad that this season is about over. This is especially true with corn and soybean producers. It certainly has been a very unusual year.

None of us need a reminder of the spring, but most areas of Indiana started out and remained wet for a very extended period which delayed or prevented row crop planting and created lots of challenges for pasture and hay.

Some areas just kept wet enough to keep you out of the fields while others remained saturated from excessive amounts of rain. I've now exceeded my 2018 rainfall of 61 inches and the year is not over yet.

Fall planted oats and brassicas can provide be excellent feed

Surprisingly, even with all the rain, there was still a droughty period from late August until early October, which varied slightly depending on location. This dry period created issues with fall-planted annuals and stockpiled forages.

Lots of fall seeded annuals, for cover crops and forage, had delayed emergence and or growth because there was not enough moisture available at the time of planting. Those fall-planted species have no issues waiting for rain and will wait to grow until there is enough water available, but growth was delayed and so was yield. There was ample opportunity this year to actually get these annuals planted early, but where moisture was an issue, some won't reach their production potential. Even with delayed growth, I'm still receiving reports and have seen lots of great stands and many grazing opportunities.

I planted some oats and turnips the first week of September. Most didn't start growing until several weeks later except those that happened to be in tractor tracks. After moisture was replenished, they took off quite well, but still a little late to reach potential production. Either way, it was still worth the effort. When grazing high moisture annuals such as turnips, remember to make sure to have adequate fiber available. Occasionally, some hay may need to be fed with them to balance the rumen.

The lack of rainfall during September also played havoc on forage that was planned for stockpile. This has happened before. Tall fescue-based pasture slowed or stopped growing during that time frame. It went into a light dormancy while waiting on some rain. Even though grazing was deferred in plenty of time for ample growth, moisture is still required. If you have been maintaining good stop-grazing heights and vegetative cover, those stands did better and continued to grow, but maybe just not as vigorously as you would have liked. For those of you who were banking on stockpiled forage for late fall and winter grazing, the lack of good interest (growth) on this fall bank account could be a little disappointing.

I believe it is best to never put all your eggs in one basket. It's good to utilize stockpile if available, but you must keep more than one tool in the toolbox and be ready to change directions if needed. It would great to be able to bank on stockpiled forage every year, but stockpile, like winter annuals depends on the weather and both should be in your game plan to help extend the grazing season, but probably not "banked" on.

In some parts of the country, land costs are cheaper, and you can afford to allocate more acres per animal unit. The more land you can have per animal unit (1,000-pound live weight), the more days you can usually graze that year. Some people do a great job of balancing the forage resource to livestock numbers and still graze most of the time, even occasionally close to 365 days and still not overgraze. Others are lucky to maintain the livestock they have during the growing season. That growing season varies a lot from one end of Indiana to the other and is slightly different from one year to the next. It runs from about 140 days in the north to over 200 potential days in the south.

Those days outside of the normal growing season can be utilized for grazing if you have stockpiled forage, winter annuals, crop residue or a combination. If not, then you are balancing out feed needs outside of the growing season with fed feeds. The one big problem with fed feeds is cost. All fed feeds have a cost factor, even if you do everything yourself. If a wheel is turning, you are spending money. All fed feeds are inputs into the operation that increase cow (or other grazing livestock) costs and take away from the bottom line.

Sometimes, fewer animal units are more profitable than more animal units. That happens when input costs don't support the additional numbers of animals or pay benefits for the expenditures. This is especially true when those fed feeds are higher than normal. When livestock are also lower in price, the cost of production becomes even more important. I have always felt that it is better to plan and bank on lower prices and make the operation stay in the black under those conditions. If you are in the black during low years, then higher priced years will be that much better. The best way to do that is to keep control of input costs.

So, how many animal units can you run on the acres you have? Funny that you would ask that. The answer is "it depends!" You knew I was going to say that. What are the determining factors? Animals present, acres available, yield and management.

Animal numbers are more than x number of cows. An animal unit is 1000 pounds of live weight. A cow that weighs 1,400 pounds is 1.4 animal units. She is going to consume roughly 40% more dry matter in a day than a 1,000-pound cow. A dry, non-lactating cow on maintenance is going to consume a little less than a lactating cow or a growing animal. Animal intake of dry matter varies between 2% and roughly 5% of its bodyweight per day. Most adult cows under maintenance will consume about 2.6% of their body weight a day in dry matter, so that 1,400-pound cow will consume about 42 pounds of dry matter per day as compared to the 1,000-pound cow with the same maintenance needs, which would need about 30 pounds of dry matter per day. A growing animal may easily consume 4% or more of its weight a day in dry matter.

Forage yield varies a lot depending on numerous factors. The type of soil in your pasture is important and although you can't change the soil type, you can change or improve its health. You can't change the soil texture which is the natural amounts of sand, silt and clay present in the soil, but you can influence pH, drainage where applicable, organic matter content over time, and certainly fertility. You can also influence carrying capacity from management.

If you improve the management of the pasture and increase the efficiency of the pasture and increase production, the pasture can handle a higher carrying capacity. Grazing systems that protect the system from overgrazing and allow for adequate rest, are able to maintain a better solar panel, grow more forage, and have more energy reserve and higher yields.

Isn't it easier and better for the bottom line to increase production on the same acreage rather than trying to buy or lease more acres? I'd rather double production of forages than double acres any day…unless I could do both!

If forage and stored feed is an issue, then animal numbers still need to be looked at. I've said it before and I'll say it again, and the late Gearld Fry would agree with me, "10% percent of the herd could probably be culled in any year. If you cull out the bottom rung of animals, the remaining animals will be just that much better, and the gene pool might also improve. If an animal doesn't fit your program, management, or has not kept up with the status quo, then it perhaps needs to grow some wheels."

Contact your local USDA field office to learn more about soil health in pastures and continue to assess how you can improve your pasture, livestock, and system. It's worth the time and effort.

Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at
https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/in/technical/landuse/pasture/