

Grazing Bites



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Fall is here even if it doesn't feel like autumn weather. I like warm weather and am always sad to have to see it go. Several people have commented to me about dry conditions. For me, after almost a year with no completely dry periods, it has been nice for a change, especially to not have to get the baler out after mowing the lawn.

But the dryness is a concern and has caused a lot of stress on plants. After continuous wet conditions all spring and into summer, plants got lazy. They didn't have to grow deep roots to find water earlier in the year and when the rains stopped after prolonged wet periods, shallow-rooted plants were not prepared for it.

Soils that were compacted by use under wet conditions further reduced the ability for those plants to grow downward. Overgrazing forages and not maintaining good stop grazing heights does not support good root systems, so live roots are reduced, and the plant's reserves hampered. Overgrazing increases evaporation, especially when there isn't enough decomposing residue. Increased soil temperature then makes it even harder to maintain moisture. You just can't afford to not maintain cover, especially going from wet to dry weather.

Fall-planted annuals have also been challenging due to the lack of sufficient moisture. I was glad to finally get some small amount of rain late in the month to help get early September planted annuals up and growing. I knew with rain they would eventually sprout and start growing, but I also knew the later that happened, the less forage it would potentially grow. That late start will require some prolonged and unseasonal warm weather along with sufficient moisture to make up some of the difference. Annuals that were no-tilled earlier in the season when there was more moisture are doing better. The annuals will, or should, still make some decent grazing. The ability to graze these annuals or corn residue will allow needed rest for pastures and potentially more growth for later grazing.

Forage rest and regrowth is important in the fall. First of all, the rested forage can certainly be very useful for early winter grazing or as stockpile for winter. Remember the plant is also trying to build up reserves in its roots for winter. Continuing to graze these forages throughout the fall pulls from those reserves and will reduce and slow spring growth. Of course, grazing can be a useful tool if you are wanting to frost seed clover into the stand later this winter, but otherwise, it will only reduce spring growth, reduce the forage's competition with weeds and the soil be a lot more susceptible to pugging under wet conditions, which will only increase weed issues even more. It is always better to try and wait until the plants are completely dormant before grazing them.

The time frame to allow for some forage R&R is certainly dependent on the weather. Prolonged warm weather will support fall growth of cool season forages for quite a while, especially if we have enough moisture. Ideally, stands that are already struggling or weak should be rested starting in early October and not grazed until dormant. Dormancy often requires several nights in a row at 25 degrees or lower. Once dormant, the forage can be grazed with less harm to the plant's energy reserves. Again, the goal is to maximize as much growth as possible for as long as possible prior to grazing the forage. Grazing annuals, corn stalks, or even feeding a little hay will provide that needed R&R and provide payback later.

So, if you haven't started stockpiling any forage yet, start today! Tall fescue stockpiles better than any other forage and holds its quality longer than almost any other perennial forage, which is one of its best attributes.



Stockpile forages now to provide needed rest and forage for later this winter.

Droughty conditions and reduced forage availability this time of year increases potential issues with poisonous plants. The first one that comes to mind is white snakeroot, which has numerous heads of small white flowers and is common along woodland edges, woods and streams at this time of year. Livestock normally will avoid consuming white snakeroot under typical growing conditions, but as ample desirable forages decline or disappear, poisonous weeds will begin to look good. Whether these weeds are eaten in large amounts at one time or in small amounts over a period of time, both can be fatal. Nursing animals are often affected from the milk and commonly fatal with no signs of ailment from the adult. If your grazing livestock have access to potential problem areas, it would be best to scout the area ahead of grazing. Small patches of plants can be removed; if there are too many, keep the livestock out! The leaves of the white snakeroot are opposites, have toothed edges and taper to a point. Flowers are small clusters of small white flowers. If you have problems identifying this plant, contact your local extension office for assistance.

With frosts in the near future, remember that sudangrass, sorghum-sudan hybrids and johnsongrass produce a cyanide compound when frosted causing the production of the prussic acid. Livestock should be removed from these forages for at least two weeks to allow for the forages to “dry down” and the prussic acid to dissipate before grazing again to be the safest. Frosted areas could start with only “pockets” in a field. Any regrowth from the base of the plant after a frost can also be very high in prussic acid. If in doubt about nitrates or prussic acid – test before feeding or grazing!

The rain we received earlier this year was good for forage growth, but it also hindered quality hay production. Most hay was cut at a full bloom or later stages of development. Forage quality is measured by crude protein, energy and digestibility and all decline as the plant matures. Hay yields were very good in some areas this year, but quality, especially that first cutting hay, tended to be low. Spring calving cows will have a fairly low nutritional need right now, especially if they are in good body condition. It might be more advantageous to feed some of the lower quality hay now while needs are low, allow those pastures to grow all fall and then graze that forage later in the winter as nutritional needs start increasing.

It is recommended to have your hay tested so you know exactly what quality you have so you can plan ahead on any supplementing needed. If too much supplementation is needed, then animal numbers should be revisited considering the cost of those inputs needed for the rest of the winter. Winter feeding costs have to be considered and are usually primary inputs into an operation. Consult your local extension office if you need help assessing hay quality and supplemental requirements.

Remember early fall is the time to assess your winter feeding needs and supply. 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. For easy math, figure at least 3% dry matter requirements per live body weight. A 1,200-pound cow will consume then about 36 pounds of dry matter per day. A quick inventory of total live animal weights times that 3% will give you a ballpark idea on what they will be consuming daily. Then assess your hay and other feed. Once you stop grazing for the year, will you have enough feed available until spring? Don't forget to consider potential waste in your calculations. There is usually increased waste with lower quality hay. Always better to know now than to find out in the middle of the winter or early spring when supplies are low.

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/>