



# Grazing Bites

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I walked across some pastures on the last day of November and shook my head as water splashed up from my gum boots and splattered my pants. I was honestly hoping that this winter wouldn't be anything like last year, but so far it is. Ugh, I'm afraid that mud is coming.

Fall forage growth was delayed due to dry weather in most of Indiana. That dry spell didn't last too long, but long enough to reduce fall regrowth and stockpiled forage. So, quite a bit of the area started the fall out with a little less forage than average. I estimate that my six-week dry spell cost me at least one third of my stockpile yield.

Now, with slightly less forage present and grazing of stockpiled forages already in motion, it's going to be even more important to be careful how we graze it.

I don't care if you are strip-grazing stockpile or turning livestock into one paddock at a time; it's going to be critical this year to not overgraze. I state this for a good reason. Lots of fields were grazed down tight last fall and early winter. When spring came with the unceasing rains, not only were forages impeded from overgrazing the previous season, but there was little residual cover or dry matter to soften the impact of grazing livestock, thus really delaying grazing. This delay in production and grazing increased the amount of hay that was needed, and hay was a premium in most areas.

For most forages, it is ideal to leave at least three inches of residual in the last grazing event of the season; four is better. Not only does this provide some extra protection in the spring, it also provides some dry matter to go with that watery, early forage, especially if we are running out of hay. It can get us back on pasture a little quicker. Even though it's not always possible or easy to do, leaving at least one paddock or area with six to eight inches of forage makes for a great place to start grazing in the spring and usually a nice place to calve.

Wet weather throws a wrench in a lot of plans. There are thousands of acres of cover crops in the state that could possibly be grazed if infrastructure is present. I started to walk out into a field close to me that had been planted to cereal rye and turnips with the plan to graze it. That dry period in September kept it from growing for weeks after being planted, and once rains came, shortened days slowed growth and again reduced potential yield. But that wasn't the biggest problem. By the time it was ready to graze, rain, untimely rain I suppose, had saturated the soil and prevented grazing, at least for the time being. I weigh about 180 pounds and I was making depressions about two inches deep where I walked. Can you imagine what a 1,200-pound cow might do? She would certainly plow it.

It's best to stay off these fields until they are at least frozen. Once frozen, there will still be some grazing potential, but with less damage to the soil structure and less mud for livestock to deal with. Mud, especially during the winter, increases energy needs. I'm sure that you burn more energy walking through heavy mud in comparison to dry or frozen ground; livestock are certainly not different.

Back to the tightness of grazing. If you plan to frost-seed clover later this winter, taking these fields down a little tighter than the prescribed is understandable. The earlier it is grazed tight, especially pre-dormancy, the more you typically reduce energy reserves in the grasses. This can be advantageous if you really want to boost clover the next spring because it retards spring grass growth, especially of new seedlings. You certainly don't want to do this on all your fields because you will potentially eliminate sufficient early spring growth and have no fields in ideal condition for the first grazing. It's probably best to never do more than two-thirds of the pastures in a system at a time. This is



*Fall planted cereal rye and turnips are great feed if we can graze them...*

also important because you don't want to graze those newly legume-supplemented fields too early either. Timing is important. Top grazing to keep grasses under control until the legumes have taken off is best.

Some are still predicting another long, wet winter. I guess it is always best to plan for the worst and then be happy when it doesn't happen. Depending on pasture condition, continue grazing pastures until they have been grazed to a good overwintering height like mentioned earlier. Some forages need taller overwintering heights to help them maintain the stand. Most cool season grasses and clover will fall in the three to four-inch category. If you are grazing warm-season forages, they are ideally six to eight inches.

If the fields are too wet and you are getting some pugging while grazing, then you would be better off taking livestock off the pasture or crop land until the ground either dries up or freezes. In this instance, you would feed hay until conditions are suitable again to graze. I doubt the cows will mind at all going back to grazing something green if given the opportunity.

Corn stalks, mainly the leaves and shucks, make decent feed and I am still seeing some use of them. The real value of feed quality tends to go down with the passing of time starting right after harvest. Generally, the first 60 days post-harvest is the best quality, but if harvest is prolonged due to wet conditions, those stalks may have lost some of their crude protein value as nitrogen breaks down. October and November are typically the best months for their use. If annuals such as cereal rye, oats, and or brassicas such as turnips or radish have been seeded into these corn fields, then the quality of that collective mix of green and stalk can be very good.

Whether you are grazing crop residue, cover crops, winter annuals, or a combination, crop fields that are highly erodible (HEL) and used for grazing must comply with Farm Bill requirements after grazing. Grazing them under wet conditions, especially muddy conditions, usually means that some tillage will be needed come planting time to smooth fields. If severe, deeper tillage may be needed to help to alleviate accumulated compaction. Sadly, we rarely have dry enough conditions in the spring to break up compacton.

Cover crops, especially over-wintering cover crops, will help to reduce minor compaction in combination with normal freezing and thawing. It is just best to refrain from feeding any supplements or hay in crop fields or leave livestock in the field over extended time frames, especially under wet conditions, to prevent compaction issues the next crop year.



When grazing is not practical or you have run out of stockpile and/or pasture, then move to hay for the rest of the winter. The efficiency of hay is dependent on how you feed it and how it is stored. The worst-case scenario is hay-fed, free choice without any feeder structure and hay stored outside on the ground, which sadly means you quite often wasted about 45 percent of the offered hay.

Feeding enough hay for only two to three days at a time, creating some competition between cows, in-ring or fence line feeders, and storing bales inside is reasonably efficient with a lot less waste; that is of course if the hay is good quality too. Hay fed on pasture is a good option if you rotate feeding locations and it's dry enough or frozen. This method puts nutrients, organic matter, and seed back on the pasture and is a great way to build up soil in poor or thin areas.

I have talked about taking inventory of winter feed before and that is something that is not too late to do. Sometimes when forages and hay are short, we are better off to reduce the number of animals. This is especially true when livestock prices are lower and feed costs and inputs are harder to justify. Input costs are something that we can somewhat control.

Merry Christmas and 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/>