

# Grazing Bites

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We got a bit too far into numbers and math last issue, but understanding grazing math is important and powerful information and can certainly impact your bottom line. You certainly don't want to wait until this time of year to find that you don't have enough winter feed so we must constantly be looking ahead.

There is more than one way to reduce the amount of hay or winter feed needed and we probably need to take advantage of them. We've discussed some of these before, such as the use of crop residue, cover crops, annuals of all kinds and stockpile, of course. I can't stress enough that this does require thinking ahead.

The biggest advantage, which can produce nice dividends, is getting livestock off pastures in late summer and keeping them off as long as possible. You are able to do this IF you have somewhere else you can go with the livestock. This doesn't mean letting them "accidentally" roam over onto your neighbor's farm, but honestly that could be a viable option...with permission of course.

If you can get the grazing livestock off the pasture early, say late August or early September, then that deferment of pasture use provides a wonderful recovery period, capturing the last part of the growth curve for cool season forages and allowing for a lot more forage growth that can be used later in the late fall or winter or even going into spring.

The first opportunity to move the grazing livestock to somewhere different could be very early, even as early as late July. That is possible when a summer annual or mix is planted directly after a wheat crop. Some people don't think about all the possible options that could come from utilizing a nearby, or better yet, connecting crop field. Double crop soybeans are not always the best option or even feasible after wheat, especially above Interstate-70.

Utilizing a summer annual mix after wheat instead of double crop soybeans can provide several benefits besides high yielding quality forage for livestock. They can certainly reduce erosion potential of the field, improve soil structure from adding massive amounts of roots and those roots create passages and pore spaces to allow increase moisture percolation and aeration of the soil and also help increase soil organic matter. You also can't forget about the diversity that is being added into the cropping system and soil microbiome either.

Could the feed value of that summer forage be worth more than the soybeans harvested after inputs? Yes, that is very possible. How quickly you can start grazing the annuals will depend on the species and moisture but can sometimes be within just a few weeks of planting.

The next best option arrives or could possibly arrive mid to late August or early September depending where you are located and if you are cutting silage. If you are cutting silage, then it's pretty much a no brainer; you have plenty of time to get an early fall annual forage or cover crop planted.

I will side track here briefly to point out that annual forages and cover crops could be pretty much one in the same, but the main difference being annuals planted for just forage or grazing are not true cover crops of which have primary goals of erosion control, weed suppression, and soil health. That doesn't mean



*Can annuals on cropland extend the grazing season?*

that you can't achieve some of the same benefits, you can, but management of that vegetation is the difference.

Back to the post silage scenario. Generally, because silage corn is chopped much earlier than corn for grain, you have ample time to get annuals planted and get tremendous growth off them for early grazing. A combination such as oats, a brassica such as a turnip or rapeseed, and cereal rye or triticale, works great planted then. The earlier they are planted, the greater the opportunity for moisture and growth.

With enough moisture and time, the brassica and oats can provide an enormous amount of early fall forage to graze. The oats and brassica come on strong with enough nutrients and moisture for possibly September to December grazing options. The cereal rye or triticale is laying quietly underneath and it takes off early spring, creating another possible grazing opportunity if you have good soil conditions.

A crop field that is no-tilled continuously, and especially with cover crops or annuals for grazing, will normally holdup better for grazing than one that has been tilled. On a tilled field, the livestock, especially cows, will more likely pug up the site to the depth of the tillage. Fields where natural soil aggregation has been maintained or built back have more air and infiltration because of that structure and thus are able to be more resilient to grazing. If carefully managed, the field can still be successfully no-tilled after the grazing event. Part of that management is not grazing during excessively wet periods, not feeding on the cropland, and not lingering any longer than necessary. We'll discuss management more some other time.

Why talk about this right now? Because now is the time to start planning the forage balance for the rest of this year and thinking ahead for improvements for next winter. Winter feed costs are generally at least fifty percent of the cost of keeping a cow around. Depending on the price of hay, winter feeding will run from a shy dollar per day per animal unit or \$1.20 for a 1,200-pound cow to over \$2.00 per day depending on the source of hay and/or other feeds fed. That adds up very fast. Hay and other feed are not free. There are always nutrients to be returned, equipment to maintain, and if a wheel is turning, we are spending money. A dollar saved, is a dollar earned. That's a Benjamin Franklin adage with some inflation added on.

Lastly, the question about when we can start grazing has already been asked. There is regrowth in some areas mainly due to some slightly warmer weather periods this winter. The cows are always ready to consume those tender morsels, but it is still best to wait until there is ample growth available prior to any grazing. Grazing too quickly in the spring actually reduces the total production for the season. Most cool season grasses should be at least eight inches tall prior to the first grazing and even then, shouldn't have much removed with the first grazing because the plant is rebuilding that needed solar panel and new roots. Remember, it takes grass to grow grass.

Keep on grazing!

## Reminders & Opportunities

**Southern Indiana Grazing Conference (SIGC)** – March 4, 2020, Crane, IN – Speakers include Troy Bishop “The Grass Whisperer,” Greg Brann, and Seven Sons. For more information contact the Daviess County Soil and Water Conservation office at 812-254-4780, Ext 3, email Megan Fredrick at [megan.frederick@daviess.org](mailto:megan.frederick@daviess.org) or visit <http://www.daviesscoswcd.org/index.php/sigc> or <https://www.facebook.com/SouthernIndianaGrazingConference>

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