

Grazing Bites

September 2020

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The summer has flown by and, like it or not, I have to start thinking about fall activities that need to be accomplished long before winter decides to show up. It has not been an easy summer. It seems a lot of time was spent trying to catch up on things and either dealing with dry periods or trying to get something done in between rains. I was reminded recently that one of my uncles would say that he prefers a rain every Saturday evening. That way, activities could resume as scheduled Monday morning and moisture would still be enough. Weather will never be that predictable, but it would be nice.



It's been a good year for red clover, almost too good.

It is the time of year to be thinking about any stockpiled forage that you might want or need. I've said it before, but if tall fescue has an attribute, it is as winter stockpile. It does need to be thought out some, and you will have to do some planning if you want quality forage for winter grazing.

Any tall fescue fields that you plan on stockpiling to use in the winter need to be deferred from grazing starting immediately or better yet, last week. You want to be able to accumulate as much new fall growth as possible on these fields to create standing hay that you can use later.

Graze, mow or hay the field to even out the stand and hopefully, with moisture, new vegetation will start growing if it isn't already. Apply 30-60 pounds of nitrogen if clover isn't at least 30 percent of the stand. Urea works well as long as moisture is present. Judging how much clover is present can be misleading. There always appears to be more than there really is. It is best assessed by dry weights, and no, I don't expect most people to do that, but you can visually estimate it. If it appears to occupy about 50 percent of the stand and a white clover, then you can normally assume that in reality it is about 25 percent of the stand. If it is about 50 percent of the stand and a red clover, then it is usually close to that percentage. White clovers have a lot more moisture and don't account for as much dry weight as red clover when visually estimating them. Carefully graze fields heavy in clover prior to stockpiling to help promote the grass.

Defer grazing and stockpile at least one acre of tall fescue per 1000-pound live weight that you plan to be grazing. Of course, more is better. Tall fescue's greatest attribute is its ability to maintain its nutritional value throughout the winter. During December, January and February, tall fescue will really shine; the rest of the time it is only somewhat tolerable. Fall-grown tall fescue can average 13 to 18 percent crude protein depending on how much nitrogen has been applied to the stand and will maintain good nutritional value on up into the spring when new growth starts to appear. I've tested lots of stockpiled forage (much of it tall fescue) and the lowest value I've ever seen with the fescue was 11 percent crude protein with 62 percent digestibility, and that was in early March right before new growth. At this quality, it is better feed than a lot of hay. The ergovaline, the endophyte toxin associated with tall fescue, is usually reduced after a hard freeze, so procrastinating on grazing it is a good thing.

Always good to test forages and feed to make sure it is meeting the nutritional requirements of the animals utilizing it. I really wish orchardgrass would hold value like this over winter, but it falls apart quite quickly after hard freezes. Most people think that ergovaline doesn't pose a problem in stockpiled fescue because the

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Issue 152

ergovaline appears to concentrate in seed heads and stockpiled fescue is generally vegetative. Livestock eat stockpiled fescue better after a couple of hard frosts or freezing conditions. This suggests that there is still ergovaline present in infected fescue, reducing intake until after freezing conditions. Most studies have found that ergovaline content drops fairly fast after mid-December. Sadly, as long as endophyte-infected tall fescue is growing, it is probably still producing some ergovaline. I might like long, warm falls, but it can delay the ergovaline reduction. An earlier winter or cold weather tends to prompt lower levels of ergovaline. So, the best time frame to utilize endophyte-infected tall fescue is probably mid to late winter. Ergovaline in hay also reduces over time. I do believe that cooler, healthier soils tend to have lower ergovaline content, especially with good diversity.

For now, let the fields used for stockpiling grow. Continue rotating through the rest of the pastures like normal, maintaining stop-grazing heights as much as possible. If you have corn stalks, hay aftermath or annuals that can be grazed, that may provide you more opportunity to defer those stockpiled fields longer and possibly grow even more stockpile. Corn stalk fields that are planted to grazable annuals create even more opportunity to stockpile and can buy you more growth time and grazing time. If you have crop fields close that can be grazed, there are a lot of opportunities, especially when these are planted to annuals. High quality forage can be produced in the fall if planted early enough. My favorite mix is spring oats, turnips or radish, and cereal rye. The oats and brassica come on early and with sufficient moisture can produce a lot of quality forage. The cereal rye remains fairly quiet in the background until spring and then it kicks in providing the opportunity for some spring grazing or just prime cover to no-till into.

So, it's time to be thinking about getting that fall annual mix planted. The earlier it is planted, the more potential growth you have. Fall oats are higher in water-soluble sugars and have a higher level of total digestible nutrients than spring grown oats and produce a lot of quality forage in a short time frame with sufficient moisture. Those oats and turnips grow fast under good conditions. Being able to get off pastures for a while in the late summer or early fall allows pastures to rest and grow more forage for use later; a perfect situation for some stockpiling.

I've been asked about how much space is needed for a winter-feeding area. There are several "it depends" involved: soil type, presence of heavy use area, drainage, vegetation type, certainly weather, and to a degree the type of feed used. I really hope that you don't need it too much, but it always should be part of your contingency plan.

I usually plan at least 100 square feet of pad per animal unit. That is often not enough depending on the weather and length of time it's needed. If you can't clean off the area over the period, then quite often, another site or extensions are beneficial. I don't like animals on any site more than 45 days. Concentrated areas will usually be totally denuded and can present erosion issues from loss of vegetation. If left on a larger area over winter, there are typically less concentrated areas but the entire area is grubbed extremely close, especially all new growth as spring approaches. This usually grossly retards forage growth and requires a long deferment before grazing again to allow desirable species to grow back. The more disturbance, the less likely that will happen and thus prickly pigweed, barnyard grass, cocklebur, goose grass, or any weed in general will take over. I'd estimate that if the overwintering area is less than 1/4 acre per animal unit, severe damage to the forage stand and sod will often occur. A half-acre might be better mud wise, depending on the drainage and soils, but the vegetation can still be damaged; okay, probably another good topic in the near future.

Remember, it's not about maximizing a grazing event, but maximizing a grazing season! 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/>