

Grazing Bites

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I remember hearing my mother say more than once, ‘If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.’ Lately, that has been easier said than done. I try to find a little good in everything, that can be challenging. Mark Twain once stated, “It’s better to be an optimist who is sometimes wrong than a pessimist who is always right.”



Hay on wet soil trying to dry.

This year, so far, has been marked with some major challenges. At times, I felt like I was procrastinating on work that needed to be done, but in fact, I wasn’t procrastinating. I was instead twiddling my thumbs trying to patiently wait for opportunities to do what needed to be done. The weather, for the most part, hasn’t been on our side so far except for very brief intervals that only teased us.

It would be nice some year to have an average spring. The trouble is, I’m not sure what that is anymore. I would gladly share some of our excess rain with the droughty areas. On the other side of it, I’m afraid to say too much and it just completely turn off.

I’ve seen a little hay cut and put up in the extremely short windows that have been available. Excess soil moisture is still a problem even if the sun is shining for a couple days. Avoid mowing hay when the soil in the top two inches is wet. That excess moisture slows drying and can make putting up dry hay more difficult. Mow higher to allow for more air flow. Ideally, at least 2-3 inches high.

Dry hay, in order to store and keep well and maintain quality, must be baled with no more than 18% moisture. For small square bales, 16% should be the limit. Higher amounts of moisture content usually mean soured or moldy hay.

Baleage might be the most ideal way to go under present conditions if you have or can get the equipment needed to do so. Baleage it is simply hay that is too moist to store safely as dry hay, so it is wrapped or otherwise sealed in plastic at about 50% moisture. Baleage can be fermented as individual bales or in a tube. You must make sure the wrap is tight enough and sufficient to be airtight in order to exclude oxygen and mold formation. Baleage is usually baled and wrapped with at least six layers of thin plastic. Baleage can create high quality forage if done properly.

I think every producer stresses over making hay, at least part of the time. I’d absolutely rather leave the forage standing than have poor quality hay. If it is put up wet, quality is quickly reduced and that can be a very costly decision this year. Not only will the livestock not appreciate or do well on the poor-quality hay, but you also removed and relocated some very expensive nutrients that will eventually have to be replaced.

I’m surprised that I talked this much about hay already. Hay usually is cheap insurance, but not this year. Some may still think it is not costing them that much, but one must consider fuel and value of nutrients removed even if you want to consider your time being free. I think everyone, no matter how efficient their type of grazing system, should have some hay on hand. It is your insurance plan and one of your contingency plans. Feeding less hay is a good thing though, at least it should be – meaning you are hopefully grazing more.

Smaller operations, especially ones with less than 15 cows or equivalents, would have difficult time justifying owning hay equipment. That depreciating investment would probably be best spent on improving the grazing efficiency of the farm or on fertility.

If you are in what I will refer to as a “building” stage of soil fertility — in other words it still needs some — then you would be better off bringing in fertility, in the form of hay than to remove it. If fields are in that building stage, it is counterproductive to cut hay off it — no question. You are just removing and moving needed nutrients, especially phosphorus. Certainly, spend a few dollars on some soil fertility tests so you have a better understanding of nutrient levels. Focus forage harvesting, dry hay or baleage, on fields with the most nutrient availability and only cut what you know you will need and protect that investment by harvesting it correctly and storing it properly.

Most years there is usually hay around to be bought. Plan ahead if you are going to be buying and if possible, visit the hayfield from which your hay will come ahead of time, so you have a better idea of the quality. If you are purchasing hay that is already baled or sight unseen, request a hay analysis to make sure it is the quality needed to meet your livestock’s nutritional needs and to make sure it really will beat “snowballs.”

I’ve been asked the question of what to do with runaway forage. Keep grazing. Allocate in smaller allotments and keep moving. This will return more nutrients back to the same area and keep forage under more control. The, allow sufficient time for the forage to recover before grazing it again. Normally that will be a while unless you are over stocked. It is the first of June. You should not be short on forages.

Clipping can be beneficial in helping to maintain quality but will be a more costly endeavor this time around. If you do clip, only remove seed heads and stay above the leaves. If you can’t do that, then go back to plan A, graze.

I have to ask the question though, what is the reason for your mowing? If it is to improve or maintain quality — have at it — just don’t mow any shorter than necessary. If it is purely for aesthetics, you might be better off leaving it alone. Taller forages produce more live roots providing some drought insurance, can help to shade out some weeds, can provide for slightly cooler soils and maintain moisture which can promote more growth from cool season forages instead of less desirable plants and then the added benefit of some wildlife habitat.

Remember, it’s not about maximizing a grazing event, but maximizing a grazing season! Don’t get carried away with the hay, just manage advantageous grazing avenues — yep, 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/>

Fencing school at SIPAC on June 18. 1 PM to 5:30PM – More information coming - Flyer will be posted on SIPAC website. <https://ag.purdue.edu/arge/pac/Pages/sipac-home.aspx>

Purdue Forage Management Day will be September 1 at the Feldun-Purdue Agricultural Center, Bedford. <https://ag.purdue.edu/agry/dtc/Pages/Calendar.aspx>

Grazing Bites has changed. Please send comments or questions to grazingbites@gmail.com.