

Grazing Bites

September 2022

Victor Shelton, Retired NRCS Agronomist/Grazing Specialist

Some people try to make pasture management a lot more difficult than needed. I think sometimes it is more about how it is perceived in the eyes of the beholder. Some might think that a pasture that is grazed evenly to the ground, all the time, means that no forage was lost – no. Some might think that mowing it frequently and making it look like a prime horse pasture behind a fancy fence is ideal – maybe. It is really about the management of the forage to achieve the goals of production, forage quality and numerous added benefits that benefit erosion, soil biology, and usually also wildlife.



Anytime you can keep something simple it is usually best. I've been to several events this summer and had similar questions asked to me that can be summed up as, "What are the basic rules of good pasture management?"

Manage the forage you have; consider fall planted annuals and stockpiled forages and prepare for winter!

I find myself repeating some things. That repetition is perhaps needed from time to time, but I don't want to be redundant either. I am reminded occasionally to just keep it simple. How exactly do we keep it simple? Follow a few simple rules.

- 1) Keep the soil covered with live plants – by doing so, erosion will be kept in check and the soil will be cooler, which is better for most forages and for reduced evaporation. You don't want to see any bare soil. Bare spots allow for increased evaporation, warmer than ideal soil conditions and space for opportunist weeds.
- 2) Maintain a good solar panel – which means, it takes grass to grow grass. We have to try and keep enough green plant leaves for photosynthesis, converting light energy into chemical energy. If the plants have been eaten down too much, energy for new growth is forced to come from stored energy in the roots if available, which is usually slower than photosynthesis. Like you have heard me talk about lots of times – don't graze or rather don't let the livestock graze closer than 4 inches for most cool season grasses and not closer than 6-8 inches for most warm season grasses. That is of course, the shortest forages left, not the tallest. If you are leaving at least 4 inches, there will be quite a bit of forage left that is actually taller.
- 3) Provide adequate rest before grazing it again. Everything needs rest, including forages. By maintaining good residual heights or stop grazing heights, regrowth is generally quicker especially with adequate moisture. The plant needs enough time to regrow and express itself again before the next grazing event. Multiple removals during a short time frame or continual removal weakens the plant and actually reduces production. It also reduces new root growth and lowers drought tolerance. So, grow it, graze it, then rest it - it is that simple.

We want the forage to be growing and producing abundantly, and as much as possible in a stage and quality that is best for the ruminant livestock grazing it. The livestock know what forage is noteworthy and will seek it out first. If it is the quality they need, they will eat it readily and without hesitation – definitely a desirable species in the eyes of the consumer. When we let these same forages mature too much, which

does happen, then forage quality is reduced along with intake. A small amount of the sward reaching maturity isn't that bad. It can help to build deeper roots, increase soil organic matter from increased amounts and turnover of roots, and help bring up nutrients and water from deeper in the soil profile. This is especially valuable to soils that could use some additional organic matter.

Lastly, when possible, graze the paddock in a manner that will leave nutrients in place and replace as needed. Smaller allocations tend to have less nutrient transfer than the grazing of large pastures. This is especially true when there is a long walking distance to water, mineral and/or shade. Isolated areas without one or more of the mentioned will be grazed for a shorter period and the ruminating and resting periods afterwards rarely occurs there unless forced to. This process therefore slowly moves nutrients from one spot to another as manure is more likely to be deposited on the more frequently used areas. Enough with that for now, grow it, graze it, rest it. Maintain cover, don't over graze it, let it grow back before grazing it again.

You're starting to run low on time to get fall annuals planted. The earlier they are seeded the more growth and grazing potential they will provide. My favorite mix is spring oats, a brassica such as radish, rape, or turnips, and cereal rye. The oats grow fast with ample moisture, yield well and can make some very decent hay or grazing throughout the fall. The brassica is a nice addition and is readily consumed by most grazing livestock. The cereal rye will come on stronger later and will overwinter and provide good cover for the next growing season and perhaps even some early spring grazing if soil conditions are favorable. These annuals can help improve soil health, build organic matter, reduce some weeds, and be forage too. Other fall-seeded options would include crimson clover, winter peas, triticale, wheat, barley or multiple combinations. You can't graze it if you don't plant it.

It is also time to start assessing 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 baleage should all be accounted for and prepared.

If you haven't started stockpiling any forage yet, now is the time to do so. Tall fescue stockpiles better than any other forage which is one of its best attributes. It holds quality longer than almost any other perennial forage. Grazing annuals or cover crops now will provide additional rest and growth for perennial pastures which can then be grazed later this winter.

I'm not sure that I like the forecast that I've seen so far for the upcoming winter, and I hope they are mistaken, but either way, we need to be prepared and ready. 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/>

Beef and Forage Field Day & Tour at SIPAC – September 7th at 2:00 p.m. ET and is free for IBCA and IFC members. There is a \$20 fee for non-members. Dinner is included. Learn more and register online at www.indianabeef.org or call (317) 293-2333.

Purdue Fencing School will be **October 8th** at the Southern Indiana Purdue Ag Center (SIPAC), Dubois, IN. Questions on the event can be made to Purdue Extension office at (812) 482-1782 or SIPAC at (812) 678-4427.

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