

Grazing Bites

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I probably have said it before, but I think it was Robert Frost that said, “You can’t get too much winter in the winter.” I disagree! I already miss not seeing grass on the landscape and I know that there are a lot of livestock that feel the same way.

I’m not a stickler to making or keeping new year resolutions and maybe I should be. As the old year becomes even more a piece of the past with the changing of a digit, my first thought is usually what can I do differently in this new run of 12 months that I wasn’t successful doing in the last.

We all make mistakes or make wrong decisions. A wise man recognizes those errors and works to not make them again. Life is full of lessons. You just have to pray that you learn them right the first time. Instead of making resolutions that you probably won’t keep, take some time and really study something that didn’t work last year and figure out how to improve it. For me, that’s time management. I’m not “old,” but I’m also not young and winter is closer than spring. Time gets more valuable and eventually you can’t put a price on it.

Winter came quickly and harshly this time around. Some say that it was a wintery blast that we’ll be talking about for decades – could be. I know that I haven’t forgotten or stopped talking about the winter of 1978. Luckily, for the most part, I was ready and my contingency plan kicked in. Livestock were moved to where they had shelter from the predicted winds and hay was strategized in such a way that minor effort would be required to provide access for however long was needed.

I’m usually not a huge fan of bale feeding on pasture. The reason is because most years tend to be too wet and there is not enough frozen ground. Even though I appreciate the additional nutrients and organic matter that is added to the site, I’ve also seen more harm than good done too often. Under wet, especially saturated conditions, the soil around the bales can become tenaciously mud quickly from the concentrated livestock around them – even worse if bale rings are used which would require more energy to move around than I’m really willing to provide.

If you are feeding hay, you ideally don’t want to put out too much at a time to create some competition, reducing waste and improving efficiency. Additional hay could be set out for the next feeding or two and fenced off with some temporary electric fence in lots of cases. Hay is an input into the operation, so when utilized, it needs to be efficient as possible.

I’ve seen other producers in late fall also strategically place large round bales out in the field where they will be fed and then move electric fence (and ring feeders if used) allocating the hay as needed. This certainly lessens the impact of tractor tires mudding around in the field.



Strategically placed large round bales, where they will be fed, can work well under good soil conditions.

Unrolling bales is also certainly an option and almost always better on the soil structure than standing bales. Unrolling bales spreads out the hay, dispersing the livestock more and helping to disperse nutrients and organic matter in the aftermath a lot more evenly. Quality hay is consumed readily and if conditions are good, you may not see much negative impact at all.

Even the unrolling and feeding of hay is best done where there is ample forage present. I start sounding like a scratched record repeatedly stating that maintaining good cover and good above ground growth means good root structure should be present. Overgrazed pastures have short roots and are more prone to compaction and pugging. The more pugging type of disturbance a pasture has, the more likely it will shift to forages or plants that are adapted for such conditions and those are usually less productive and desirable.

The hay feeding location should be carefully thought out. It should have proper drainage, be close to a water source if possible and not be located where it will cause problems such as along a stream or above or adjacent to a water body. The ideal site should always be where water is available, and nutrients are lacking.

It is good to keep several options open for winter feeding. Stockpiled forages become more challenging to manage and consume the deeper the snow gets or if ice is present. Sometimes it is just easier and better to put out hay and wait until the forages are more accessible again. Livestock that are used to grazing stockpiled forages surprisingly are not as concerned about snow being on top and just continue to graze. Forages usually maintain decent condition and quality even when covered for long periods with snow.

I'd much rather stay on stockpiled forage, but again, you have to pay attention to soil conditions and go with a contingency plan when needed. If conditions improve, then you can go back to grazing. Dry or frozen soils are best for any of the activities.

It is no surprise that most producers feed hay or supplemental feed in dry lots in the winter. Rocked or concrete feeding pads control mud well, reduce energy requirements of livestock as compared to deep mud and protect pastures from damage.

Why do we do what we do – because it's the life we have chosen and hopefully the next generation will benefit from it and continue unwearingly to maintain, improve, and leave the land better than when they received it too. Be efficient with your time and have a happy new year!

Remember, it's not about maximizing a grazing event, but maximizing a grazing season! Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

Northern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 3-4, 2023 - Michiana Event Center, Shipshewana, IN – More information coming soon!

Heart of America Grazing Conference – February 20-21, 2023 – Ferdinand, IN - www.indianaforage.org

Southern Indiana Grazing Conference – March 29, 2023 – Shiloh Community Center, Odon, IN – More information coming soon!

Please send comments or questions to grazingbites@gmail.com.