

GRAZING BITES

March 2023

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It might not be true everywhere, but from my viewpoint and for quite a bit of the Midwest, spring like weather has been very real recently. A warm day here or there this time of year is certainly welcomed, but extended periods of abnormally warm weather have their own issues. Honestly, I'm not quite ready for spring – mentally yes, physically no. There are just too many winter projects to finish up before everything is let loose.



Spring is coming. Calving closer to nature has some benefits – increasing forage availability is one of them.

It is still early, and warm periods are usually still followed by more cold spells. I appreciate any new growth of forages, but we need to remember that this new growth is coming from stored energy in the plant.

That stored energy is utilized until the plant can grow and obtain enough new green leaf area or solar panel to start converting and building new energy. What does this mean in a pasture setting? It means that any grazing of this new material will reduce energy reserves, slow forage growth and usually reduce total production.

The plant needs that new growth to not only rebuild its solar energy factory, but also to initiate new root growth for new energy reserves and to fuel new tillering.

One exception to this rule is use of any remaining stockpiled forage. For most producers, stockpiled forage is long gone. Most was used up in December or January if it lasted that long. I often suggest, especially if you are calving or lambing, etc. more in tune with nature, that leaving some stockpiled forage can be really beneficial. Calving on stockpiled forages makes for cleaner, drier, less muddy conditions – something that is almost always better and there is readily available forage too.

I know, earlier calves make better size for 4-H calves, and usually heavier weaned calves earlier in the fall, but that normally comes at a price. Calving later, which I like to do, and many others advocate, is more in tune with grazing forage availability and the lactation curve of the dam. Peak milk in this case is more likely to line up with peak spring forage production. That doesn't work for everyone's goals or agenda but it is something worth thinking about.

If stockpiled forage is not utilized until there is new green spring growth occurring it can still be utilized, but it may require a slightly longer rest period before it can be grazed again. If there is a lot of new green growth in this stockpiled forage, which generally means that you have waited a bit longer to graze it, the dry stockpiled forage slows down the passage of the super lush watery new forage in the rumen and animals do quite well on it mixed much more balanced.

Unfortunately, with enough new growth trying to push its way through with early warm days, it also interferes with what I refer to as “winter cleanup.” When conditions are good, e.g., frozen or dry soils, some cleanup of remaining stockpiled forage and hay aftermath can sometimes be done and help open up the sward a bit where clover has been over seeded. You just don't want to graze what is left into the dirt which would also hamper some growth later. Just remove excess forage and hoof in sown seed for better seed to soil contact.

If you haven't gotten your frost-seeding or overseeding of legumes done it is time to get it done. It is also a good time to look for any thin or bare areas that lack sufficient forage plants. This is quite common in areas that are heavily used at different times of the year. I like to scatter grass seed in these areas to try and get some growth before it is used again.

If those raw or bare areas are around permanent fixtures that are used for longer periods or a lot more frequently, then no grass is going to hold up very well and a rock pad is probably needed. This not only protects the integrity of the facility, but also reduces the overall impact of heavily used areas. If a site is only used occasionally, such as a portable water tank that is moved frequently, then those can usually be spot treated with some seed and allowed a good break before the spot is used again and fair quite well.

I've found that sites that fall in between heavily used and occasionally used still need some help sometimes and ag lime works quite well to help armor the area, especially if laid on some geotextile fabric. It is a good time to fix those sites ahead of use.

I'm behind on my late winter or early spring pasture work. Every fence that lies next to a woodland or wooded fence line needs to be checked for fallen limbs, down fences and occasionally limbs trimmed back too. Every fence that crosses a waterway or valley needs to be checked to make sure they are stable and secure, especially if they are easy access to predators.

I was asked recently to explain animal units (AU's) and why it was important. An animal unit is one thousand pounds live weight. For example, a 1,200-pound cow is 1.2 animal units ($1,200/1000=1.2$). A 160-pound ewe is 0.16 animal units. If you calculate your total animal units on your farm, then you have a good starting place to figure out an estimate of how much dry matter is going to be needed on a daily basis or even long term. Dry matter is the amount of a feedstuff remaining after all the free moisture is evaporated out.

Different types and classes of livestock consume a somewhat fixed amount of dry matter based on their live weight. Maintenance animals can usually be estimated at approximately 26 pounds of dry matter per animal unit (2.6%) – that is for the most part just maintaining the same weight. Growing or lactating animals will consume more and closer to four percent (4%) quite often. A quick reasonable estimate on average is 3%. So, if a 1,000-pound cow is consuming an average of 3% dry matter per day, she is taking in about 30 pounds daily.

You can quickly see how this estimate can help you plan out both pasture and feed needs. Certainly, each feed type has to be adjusted to dry matter weight based on moisture content.

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

Reminders & Opportunities

Southern Indiana Grazing Conference – March 29, 2023 – Shiloh Community Center, Odon, IN – For more information call 812-254-4780, Ext 3 or register online at <https://sigc2023.eventbrite.com>



International Grassland Congress (IGC) - The American Forage and Grassland Council is hosting the IGC. - May 14 to 19, 2023 - Covington, KY. The theme of the conference is "Grassland for Soil, Animal, and Human Health." For additional information or to register for the IGC, visit <https://internationalgrasslands.org/2023-igc/> or follow-on social media at @IGC2023.

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