

Grazing Bites

July 2023

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I really can't complain about the temperatures so far this year even though I know the next few days are expected to be a bit warmer. While some crops would probably prefer slightly warmer conditions, the slightly milder temperatures are better for forage crops under droughty conditions. I'm thankful things are not worse than they are. Thankfully, as I finish writing this, several areas are getting needed rain!

I've been asked how I would compare this year to past droughts or droughty periods. I really don't have a good comparison for this year. I think we are seeing conditions unlike any that I've ever seen. The droughts of 1988 and 2012 are always good reference points for me. For the most part, both started out somewhat normal and then became drier and drier due to the lack of sufficient rain for long periods of time. Both were also aggravated by high temperatures that just added fuel to the fire.

This year started out a little earlier than normal with somewhat wet conditions. Early lush green growth was struck not once, but with multiple hard freezes at a very tender and damaging phase. This stressed out the forage plants, reduced energy transfer to the roots and regrowth and encouraged self-preservation in the form of early seed production. The addition of a little nitrogen in a few cases seemed to help promote more growth, but for the most part, production was certainly adversely impacted up to the normal June peak growth point on a typical cool-season grass growth curve.

This has not only impacted hay yields but also pasture production. By mid to late June, depending on where you are, we are or should be approaching about two-thirds of our production for the year. That is one reason I often talk about forage production and assessment of animal numbers during this time frame. If you don't have enough grass in mid-June for the livestock present, then you can be sure to note that you will probably be short in July and August, if not for the whole season.

This can work for some producers, especially ones that have ample acres of hay fields usually not assessable for grazing, where they can lean on for forage for winter use. If this balance is too out of whack, then you may find yourself feeding hay a lot earlier and perhaps even during the summer – that very well could be the case for several this year with both hay and pasture production lower than normal. Grazing is still more efficient than harvesting and feeding forage.

Because of the early, stressful conditions and dry circumstances, longer recovery is needed for forages after both forage harvest and grazing before it can be utilized again. Normally we would be in the 30-to-45-day recovery time frame now, but I'm seeing sixty plus days being more realistic. Forages have had double stressors this season, which is a bit unusual, so we don't want to stress them anymore than we have to the rest of the season. The livestock certainly don't understand this, they are just doing what they are supposed to do – graze.

Forage growth slump periods can usually be managed around. Maintain soil cover and good stop grazing heights to keep that solar panel working and retaining as much moisture as possible and reducing evaporation. Don't overgraze it – grazing the snot out of it isn't going to help anything. If you are that low in forages to



A lone big bluestem plant is outstanding in the field - imagine a whole field.

graze, then you probably need to look seriously at animal numbers and/or move animals to a dry lot and feed them to let the pastures recover.

Overgrazing during a slump period, especially stressed-out plants during a drought, can really thin forage stand, increasing weed pressures down the road or the need to totally reseed the stand. If you hay it, promote growth and let it fully express itself prior to grazing. If forage is really thin, check fertility and provide a lot longer rest. Stop grazing cool-season forages when the shortest forages are down to about four inches – that means that the average height is actually probably about six inches.

If the cool-season forages were not stunted from the early freezes and droughty conditions, then they would absolutely love the temperatures we've been having more so than most years. If soil cover is maintained and there is at least the ideal stop grazing heights being kept, I've not seen any soils with a soil temperature much above 78 degrees at two inches of depth. That is a great soil temperature for the forages and for soil life.

It is not too late to plant warm season annuals, especially if you have any moisture at all to work with. The late Jim Kaiser once told me that millets would sprout and grow from nothing but the morning dew for moisture and I've found that to hold true. If some moisture is present, then there are several forages that could be planted for summer grazing or fodder. I would strongly consider planting an annual forage this year after wheat harvest instead of double-crop soybeans if you know you are going to be short of forages.

Depending on the species and available moisture, grazing annuals is usually possible an average 45 days or so after planting. Removing livestock from pastures while grazing the annuals allows for extra rest and more potential for regrowth of perennial pastures.

I've drilled summer annuals into existing pasture, but not always successfully. In the summer of 2012, that decision alone, even though it provided some good supplemental forage, reduced the perennial grass stand in the field by almost fifty percent from smothering. Thinning hay fields could also be a good place to utilize annual forages for fodder or for grazing if it is connected to other pastures and has fence and water.

I would be amiss to not also mention that producers with any existing perennial warm season grass stands will be better off production wise this year. Warm season perennials like big bluestem, Indiangrass and switchgrass have not seen much, if any, yield reduction due to weather this year. They were not impacted by the early freezes and are very drought tolerant and are growing like normal. There are several programs available for assistance in establishing perennial warm season forages.

Producers should also take advantage of cool season annuals by planting in about thirty days, especially if moisture conditions approve. Late summer planted oats, with sufficient moisture, can produce a good heavy forage crop for fodder or grazing. It can also be planted after early harvest of row crops but the earlier it is planted the more it will produce and be in good condition for dry hay if that is needed. I mention this now so you can start tracking down seed. Spring oats are just now being harvested so timing is good.

I'll end with a quote from Benjamin Franklin, "When the well is dry, we know the worth of water." Same goes for quality forage. Remember, it's not about maximizing a grazing event, but maximizing a grazing season! Keep on grazing!

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

Reminders & Opportunities

Stockmanship Training - September 29th (Beef focus), September 30th (Sheep/goat focus) – SIPAC