Grazing Bites

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Victor Shelton, Retired NRCS Agronomist/Grazing Specialist

Moisture, or rather the lack of sufficient amount of moisture, is still an issue for quite a bit of the Midwest. Some areas have certainly been blessed with more rain than others, but I must remind you and myself that we're only about two weeks away from a drought from about any time period. We should always strive to take advantage of and conserve any moisture we receive.

Regrowth is highly influenced by rest, recovery, and soil cover.

I've been repairing some fence lines along wooded areas that seem to be testing my patience. Windstorms with dying or dead ash trees don't make a good combination. That has caused me to dig and replace a few fence posts that were in the line of spoilage. On a somewhat positive point, it allowed me the opportunity to evaluate the soil moisture in the depth of the post hole. Even though I've had rain, soil moisture was a little less than normal as I dug deeper – but it could have been a lot drier.

You can't change the amount of rain you get, but you can influence the impact of that rain to a degree. Ideally, you want to capture and keep as much rainfall as you can on the landscape. When rain hits hard surfaces, especially impermeable surfaces like concrete, most of it just runs off. Pasture and hay fields can be fairly impermeable also – especially overgrazed and compacted sites.

Soil that has good cover, ideally live plants, and some duff (residue and organic matter on the soil surface) and is healthy and capable of letting water infiltrate quickly will be more drought tolerant than areas where most of the rain runs off. When you have good live plant cover, especially grasses that create good retardance to water flow in combination with soils that are capable to take on water quickly and not become saturated – meaning you have good natural soil drainage and good soil organic matter - then soil moisture is easier to maintain and utilize even when rains are not as timely as you'd like.

Let's consider for a moment your lawn. Most lawns are mowed weekly and probably at an average of two or three inches in height. The shorter the grass blades are maintained the shallower their roots will be. These closely maintained lawns require frequent rain or irrigation to keep green and growing. Just raising the mowing height to four inches increases root depth, the number of fibrous roots, and the amount of total cover reducing evaporation, increasing infiltration, and it's much more likely to stay green and growing during drier conditions – unless you want it to dry up, so you don't have to mow it. Bottom line – keep the soil covered at all times. You don't want bare soil that allows for evaporation and increased soil temperatures.

A couple months back we talked about how to manage extremely early seed head production. Grass plants tend to react to stressful factors by initiating their survival mode. This generally means they begin seed production and may also produce more seed. I still believe the real motivator this year for early seed head production was the late freezes. I proposed three viable options.

The first option was to do high intensity, short duration grazing, which means higher numbers of livestock on a small allotment for a very short period of time. This removes a high percentage of grazable forage in a short period of time with little or no refused areas. This generally does require that the pasture gets a longer deferment period prior to being grazed again. What they don't consume is laid down on the ground returning nutrients and carbon back to the soil and more importantly helping to keep the soil cool while reducing evaporation.

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The second option was to graze in a slower fashion, understanding that they will avoid more and thus create more mismatched forage growth and selection. If this is the case, then you are probably better off clipping the forages to make them even. Ideally, if you had to clip, it's best to only mow short enough to even out the forages and remove seed heads. It takes a watchful eye to make sure that you are not overgrazing (grazing too close and/or removing regrowth without adequate rest and recovery).

In a perfect world of grazing, livestock shouldn't graze the same allotment for more than three days and a lot shorter time frame is generally best. I realize that that is not practical or occasionally possible for some managers. Time is money – but time well spent can raise efficiencies and save money elsewhere such as in reduced supplemented feed. If there are a lot of overgrazed spots, then a longer deferment may be needed prior to grazing again, which could also mean reduced production.

The last option was to cut a few paddocks that you would normally graze for hay. This might have helped make up some of the differences and reset the staging for those pasture fields, allowing you to concentrate your grazing management on less acres and hopefully giving you a bit more control of the situation. If you did mow it for hay, quickly return fertility to the field to promote new growth for the season and maintain that fertility bank.

What option did I do? Actually, a little of all three. It absolutely helped to keep things growing during the prolonged dry periods but also staged the system to be the most advantageous for collecting, utilizing and storing as much of the blessed rain and sunlight that we did receive. It also helped to initiate and create new dense growth by reinvigorating the solar panel. If for some reason I have to dig a post hole out in the open pasture, it might also make the task easier with a little more reassurance that some moisture might be found the entire depth in a more resilient environment.

I've been slow to spend money on fertilizer this year or recommend it unless you have a soil test or obviously need it. The poor growth in some fields may not be fertility this year (late freezes, drought, reduced sun) – but in some cases it is and if so, it would have been poor either way. The addition of a little nitrogen (if everything is within moderate levels) could really spur a lot of regrowth going forward. I honestly don't think it would take much and most fields could benefit from phosphorous, so DAP or MAP (Di-ammonium Phosphate or Monoammonium Phosphate) could be good choices. Since quite a bit of the spring growth curve was compromised, there is a very good chance that we could get extra growth this fall if sufficient moisture is present for growth and application – look for these opportunities.

Now is the time to inventory your present forage available, potential production yet this year and stored feed for winter. Days are getting shorter and we're only about 70 days from the first possible frost. August is a good month to plant perennial forages and annuals for fall use. Remember, it's not about maximizing a grazing event, but maximizing a grazing season! Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

Pathway to Water Quality – Indiana State Fair Grounds - now to August 20th – Indiana Conservation Partnerships - Excellent watershed demonstration site and soil health!

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

For a Free Sample Copy of **The Stockman Grass Farmer** call 1-800-748-9808 or visit www.stockmangrassfarmer.com – You'll find articles from me there also.

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

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