

Grazing Bites

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The autumn colors and a few frosts and light freezes have reminded us that the growing season has come to a pause and winter weather is in the foreseeable future. Are you ready for winter?



*Autumn is certainly here –
and winter is coming!*

I generally keep a running list of things to get done. Most of the time, that list is on an index card that I carry in my pocket, but sometimes it is the back of an envelope or scrape piece of paper. I try to arrange the list from priority to “try and get done,” in that order. I slowly mark items off as the day progresses or at least I try to.

My typical winter check list includes: checking winter feed supplies with estimates of livestock needs; making sure winter feeding areas are cleaned and ready; confirming fields that might be used for bale grazing are left with enough stockpile to reduce soil and forage damage; ensuring any winter feeding equipment is ready to when needed; and checking all winter watering equipment while it’s nicer to work on if needed.

As I write this, there is some rain in the forecast and whether the rain is needed or not (most need it) it initiates an enhanced urgency of some items on the list – especially when good weather and drying days are numbered.

Typically, cool season grasses start really slowing down now and complete movement of carbohydrates towards root reserves while the above ground portions go dormant. It is at this point where we can normally feel reasonably safe to start grazing stockpiled forages without worrying about stressing the plant too much. I would prefer to wait until there have been several nights in a row in the mid-twenties. I say this with the assumption that you have also finished up grazing any corn residue that might be available. If not, keep grazing as long as conditions permit, then move to the stockpiled forage if you have any.

It has been a tough year to stockpile much forage under the dry conditions. If you were able to stockpile forages this year, then you have done very well.

If you have stockpiled forages, forages that don’t hold value very well and for very long need to be grazed first, such as orchardgrass, timothy hay aftermath, or perennial ryegrass, and even smooth brome once it has gone dormant should be first on the list. I would then move to the last grazing of the year on Italian ryegrasses and continue with annual small grains as long as soil conditions permit.

If you have any fall seeded brassicas, now is a good time to start grazing on those if you haven’t already. Most brassicas are very high in water and nutrients and most likely are going to need a little dry matter, such as hay or dry stockpiled forage added to keep a good balance. As I’ve said before, don’t stand too close behind them if you are grazing turnips by themselves or you’ll see quickly what I’m talking about; just not a good idea to graze these brassicas as a monoculture.

If you are thinking about grazing any alfalfa hay aftermath, it is important to allow the plants to go completely dormant before grazing - this is usually in the same timeline as the first hard freeze. Graze then before leaf drop. Do not graze under wet conditions to prevent crown damage and ideally leave a minimum of three to four inches of stubble for winter protection.

Pastures that could use more legumes can be grazed down extra tight at this point, opening up the canopy for frost seeding later on and also reducing competition for the new legume seedlings in the spring.

Extra thick monocultures of grass probably need to be grazed a little harder prior to going dormant in the fall to really set them back in the spring, if that is your intent. Ideally though, try and still leave three to four inches of forage behind for winter cover which helps reduce runoff, increase infiltration, and provide some dry forage with new grass next spring.

If it is going to be the first field grazed next spring, try to leave as much as possible or skip it completely. This creates a great combination to start grazing next spring – dry forage mixed with very fresh new growth. If you watch spring growth next spring – you can see a difference in forage growth as compared to how it was treated.

Water is still needed during winter months, and still needs to be adequate in quality and quantity. Now is a good time to make sure everything is working and ready. Most livestock prefer water between the temperatures of 37 and 65 degrees Fahrenheit. When the water temperature deviates very much beyond this range, intake is reduced. All-weather tanks such as “ball” tanks or heated tanks are great for extending the grazing season out in the field and for winter feeding areas. Spring developments also make really great winter watering systems because water is constantly flowing through them keeping them open and fresh.

I mentioned bale grazing earlier – it’s a good option. It certainly can help to either return nutrients back to where hay was harvested or to areas where it is needed. Bales need to be set out while soil conditions are good and ideally on soil and sites where excess moisture is not an issue. If it remains somewhat dry the next couple months, then that makes this even more practical.

Once the weather stays cold, biological activity slows down and bales can be set out in the field ahead of time with less risk of loss. Bales should be spaced according to how they will be fed. A temporary electric fence is then used to allocate out the bales being fed. In most cases, only one or two bales at a time is enough and reduces waste – roughly about two tons per acre, which also gives you a visual of about what spacing is needed.

Bale rings are good to use when bale grazing, if conditions are dry and or will be consumed fairly quickly. When conditions are less ideal, and you want to keep soil disturbance to a minimum and don’t mind a bit more waste then don’t use rings. Fields used for bale grazing should be deferred to early next year to allow time to recover and hay residual to start breaking down.

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

Reminders & Opportunities

Match Made in Heaven is trying to find out the roadblocks that producers are experiencing (or think they will experience) when integrating livestock into cropland. The goal is that more *educational opportunities* will be targeted towards *integrating livestock onto cropland* with the ultimate goal of more *soil health and expanding grazing livestock operations*. <https://greenlandsbluewaters.org/match-made-in-heaven-livestock-crops/>

New Purdue Forage Guide released – <https://ag.purdue.edu/departments/agry/agry-extension/dtc/>

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