Grazing Bites

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Stockpiled forage has a lot of benefits.

In *All Creatures Great and Small*, author James Herriot reflects on the routine of caring for animals through the changing seasons, "the winter days are closing in, the snow had begun to fall, and I felt the reassuring weight of the work ahead—the routine of feeding, checking, and caring for the animals that were always at my side, no matter the weather." This sentiment remains relevant today, as the abrupt shift from warm late fall weather to a sudden cold snap marks the beginning of winter. Such transitions highlight how quickly seasons can turn, influencing both pasture conditions and livestock care. As forage growth halts and plants enter dormancy, the remaining forage becomes more like standing hay than pasture. Managing this change, as Herriot alludes to, requires flexibility and vigilance to ensure both animal welfare and pasture quality are maintained.

This fall, we've been fortunate with generally favorable conditions, though some regions could have benefited from a little more rain. Soil moisture levels have remained fairly adequate, and I anticipate the year's total rainfall will be close to normal—though not always timely. I'm pleased with the fall forage growth and the stockpiled forage we've accumulated.

With the recent cold snap, most pastures have now entered dormancy. Dormancy is typically triggered by several consecutive nights at 25 degrees Fahrenheit or lower. Prior to dormancy, it's best not to overgraze, which is why having alternative forages like corn stalks or annuals can help preserve pastures while still providing grazing. If grazing continues while the plants are active, it removes leaves and depletes the plant's root reserves, potentially hindering spring regrowth. Overgrazing before dormancy can necessitate a longer rest period in the spring to allow the plants to recover, or it could lead to long-term pasture damage.

Grazing can still be beneficial before dormancy if the goal is to reduce competition for frost-seeded legumes, but it's important not to overgraze too many fields in the same year, as this could delay spring grazing. Once pastures are dormant, grazing becomes less harmful to the plants' energy reserves, and they can be taken down closer to the ground, provided a good residual is left. Leaving sufficient residual height helps slow winter runoff, reduces erosion and provides a strong foundation for spring growth. However, excessive grazing early in the winter may expose the sod and create opportunities for weeds to take hold, especially following any disturbance.

Leaving adequate forage over winter has multiple benefits for both soil and water. It improves the water cycle by enhancing soil infiltration, reducing surface runoff and increasing water retention, which prevents erosion and supports groundwater recharge. Furthermore, it supports carbon sequestration by allowing plants to store carbon in their biomass and soil organic matter, enriching the soil and promoting the formation of stable carbon compounds. This practice boosts soil health, enhances biodiversity, and

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mitigates climate change by reducing atmospheric CO_2 levels and improving ecosystem resilience. Stockpiled forage areas also make good places to calve or lamb under drier conditions.

When grazing, it's helpful to provide livestock with at least two-to-three days' worth of forage. Starting near the water source can be useful, especially if you use a portable watering system, though preventing freezing can be a challenge. Once forage has entered dormancy, back fencing isn't as critical, so a single water point can suffice, as long as the grazing pattern doesn't result in excessive trailing to and from water. Water intake tends to decrease during this time of year, which helps minimize trailing. Grazing should continue until the pasture reaches the desired residual height, typically three to four inches for fescues and orchardgrass. Once that height is achieved, it's time to move to the next area. While daily allocations are ideal, you can adjust the amount as needed, especially if you'll be away for a few days during the holidays.

Temporary fencing works well for managing grazing allocations, and if you're using back fencing, you'll need three sets of equipment: a reel, poly-wire and enough step-in posts. With two sets, you can move one while the other remains in place, preventing livestock from advancing prematurely. For convenience and safety, solid plastic handles on poly-wire can help prevent accidental shocks. Quality poly-wire is essential—look for options with at least eight stainless steel strands, as poly-tape tends to sag and is less reliable in icy conditions. Strip grazing can be done in any field size, though longer, narrower fields are easiest to manage. When stockpiling forage, consider field layout for easier management with temporary fencing. Step-in posts with small, strong steel tips and foot pegs make installation easier in frozen soil. In most cases, the ground won't freeze unless we experience extended sub-zero temperatures, so long as you're not grazing heavily before that point. For shorter runs, you can use inexpensive reels, but longer runs justify investing in higher-quality reels with double gearing for ease.

Tall fescue is ideal for stockpiling, as it retains its nutritional value throughout winter. If you've stockpiled orchardgrass, graze it first, as it breaks down faster and loses its nutritional value earlier in the season. Well-managed tall fescue stockpiles can provide better nutrition than hay stored for winter feed.

Remember, the goal is not to maximize each grazing event, but to extend the grazing season and optimize pasture health. Keep on grazing! Please send comments or questions to grazingbites@gmail.com.

Reminders & Opportunities

National GLCI Grazing Conference Dec 4-6, 2024, Tucson, AZ
https://www.grazinglands.org/grazing-conference/

American Forage and Grassland Council Annual Conference Jan 12-15, 2025, Kissimmee, FL https://www.afgc.org/annual-conference/

Northern Indiana Grazing Conference – January 31st -February 1st, 2025, Michiana Event Center, Call the LaGrange County Soil and Water Conservation District: (260) 463-3166 ext.3 for more information.

Southern Indiana Grazing Conference – March 26th, 2025, Odon, Indiana – Ray Archuleta, Russ Wilson, & Jeff McGuire as speakers. Call the Daviess County Soil and Water Conservation District (812) 254-4780 ext.3 for more information.

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