

# Grazing Bites

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Last fall was dry. While drought conditions didn't reach severe levels in most areas, it had a significant impact on fall forage growth. When moisture returned, it was tempting for many producers to immediately start grazing the new growth to avoid feeding hay early.

I've mentioned before how crucial it is to give forages as much rest as possible in the fall so they can build reserves for winter. If the fall is preceded by drought conditions, it becomes even more critical to wait until forages are dormant before grazing again. I know this is easier said than done in many cases. Unfortunately, those same dry conditions make it harder to grow annuals for fall forage, forces producers to either feed hay for a while, graze corn stalks or any annuals that thrived.

I bring all this up to emphasize that many pastures were grazed too tightly at the end of last year—often before they had a chance to go dormant—weakening the stands' energy and likely slowing down spring growth.

It's been a tough winter. This is especially true after the soil profile has thawed, followed by two and a half inches of rain falls creating saturated conditions and further followed by several inches of snow that insulate the soil from freezing. This results in mud. It's challenging to graze any stockpiled forage or feed hay on pasture without causing damage.

I hate seeing forage areas disturbed like this. I've witnessed entire pastures churned and muddied, with soft soil left pocked and uneven from the weight of hooves sinking into the wet ground. What was once a vegetated field is now scarred with deep, uneven indentations where soggy soil was trampled and compacted. There's little vegetation left, and the damage is especially severe when the sod is thin, the roots are short, and protective vegetative cover is lacking. Last fall's drought contributed to this situation.

Rest and recovery are crucial for pasture health, but sometimes, recovery becomes necessary for restoration. When dealing with soil disturbance on an existing perennial pasture, it's important to assess the extent of the damage before deciding whether to attempt recovery or start over.

If soil disturbance is severe—typically when 40% or more of the pasture has been compromised—recovery can be difficult without major intervention. Using the "[Pasture Condition Scoresheet](#)" and focusing on the "Plant Residue and Litter as Soil Cover" category, you'll often see a low rating (one or two), meaning bare soil is easily visible. In these cases, renovation or reseeding may be necessary because the soil may be too degraded to support healthy grass and forage growth, the damaged areas could become prone to weed invasion, and recovery could take far too long.

If the disturbance is less than 40%, you can often fix the problem by overseeding, fertilizing and implementing proper grazing management after sufficient recovery. Overseeding with clover is especially helpful, particularly if the pasture could benefit from more clover in general. Under good conditions, clover establishes quickly, filling in gaps, providing quality forage and helping suppress weeds.

Perennial ryegrass is another good option for overseeding. It establishes quickly and creates a dense root network early in the growing season. This growth not only helps protect the soil from erosion but also fills in gaps that could be taken over by weeds from the seedbank. More importantly, its deep, fibrous



*Bare soil that is easily seen is an opportunity for weeds and improvement.*

roots help reduce compaction by stabilizing the surface and preventing new traffic from further compacting the soil.

It's essential to avoid using heavy equipment on pastures when soils are wet or saturated. This can lead to soil compaction, damage to pasture plants and erosion. All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) are an ideal choice for frost-seeding or overseeding pastures because their lighter weight and wide tires minimize soil disturbance, reducing the risk of compaction and allowing for better seed-to-soil contact.

Perennial ryegrass also improves soil porosity and water infiltration, which can help counteract compaction by allowing better root penetration over time. As its roots grow, they release organic compounds into the soil, stimulating microbial activity that breaks down organic matter into humus. The decaying roots and plant material add organic matter, enriching the soil with nutrients, improving soil structure, moisture retention and nutrient-holding capacity—ultimately enhancing soil health.

The addition of both clover and perennial ryegrass can help address a lot of damage and buy time for existing perennial cool-season forages to recover.

If the damage is extensive, leveling with a harrow or other equipment may be needed once soil conditions improve. Afterward, overseeding or drilling more forage seed can be done. In cases of severe damage, reseeding the pasture entirely may be the best option. This could also be a good opportunity to use improved forage varieties that better support animal health and production. I've never been a fan of interseeding tall cool-season grasses into existing perennial grasses, as the competition from surviving perennials can prevent the new plants from being established. If the interseeded forages are more desirable or palatable than the existing species, they're usually grazed out quickly, rendering the effort ineffective. Starting over with a clean slate and terminating the old forage is often the better approach. If you go this route, it's advisable to wait before replanting. Consider using a summer annual to ensure the old forage—often endophyte-infected tall fescue—is completely gone. This gives you a window when weeds are less likely to interfere with new forage establishment in August.

When hay is fed on pasture, the leftover hay, manure, and urine from the animals provide natural fertilization for the soil. This organic material contributes nutrients, such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, which can improve soil health and promote better forage growth. Of course, this is most effective when soil conditions are favorable, which may not always be the case; take the past few weeks for example. On the other hand, feeding hay on pasture also often automatically provides some forage seed to the site, which can be very beneficial for recovery. For this reason, make sure the hay you are feeding in this manner is from similar or improved forages and not weedy. At most, just to help speed up the process, a harrow could be run over the site to spread leftover material and level things up a bit.

Looking ahead to next fall, and hoping for better conditions, consider leaving more forage for later grazing, even if it means feeding some hay earlier. Also, think about adding more grazing opportunities to your plan. Before you get too busy with the activities of spring, take time to assess your pastures and develop a strategy if needed. Overseeding in areas with disturbance is always a good idea; the extent of the destruction will determine how extensive the overseeding needs to be.

It's not about maximizing a single grazing event but optimizing the entire grazing season. Keep grazing!

### **Reminders & Opportunities**

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



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