

Grazing Bites™

January 2026

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January is a natural time to reflect back, think forward and set the stage for a more resilient grazing season. After nearly two decades of writing *Grazing Bites*, one thing remains consistent: no two years are the same. Rainfall, temperatures, and growing conditions can swing dramatically from one part of Indiana to another—not to mention across the rest of the Midwest. Because of that variability, the most dependable management strategies are the ones that function well regardless of weather. January is the month to revisit those principles, tighten the plan, and begin the year on solid footing.



Winter is the time for planning, not predicting the next grazing season.

A grazing plan is only as strong as the goals behind it. Winter offers the clearest mental space for honest assessment of the herd, the land and one's time. It invites you to sit down with a notebook, a cup of coffee and the experiences of the past season to ask realistic questions: What needs improvement this year—soil health, animal performance, pasture recovery, weed pressure and/or feed efficiency? Where did pressure show up last year—short forage, parasite challenges, worn-out fencing, and/or too much mud in high-use areas? Which changes are achievable—adding a cross fence, improving water access, moving livestock more frequently and/or adding warm-season grasses?

Effective goals should be specific and measurable, not vague intentions such as “graze better” or “get ahead of weeds.” Beneficial goals sound more like maintaining a minimum four-inch residual on cool-season pastures, rotating every three-to-five days instead of every seven-to-ten, establishing a set number of warm-season forage acres or reducing purchased feed by a realistic percentage. Goals like these guide daily decisions, and daily decisions are what ultimately build resilient systems. January is an appropriate time to refine those intentions into something workable.

Winter is also an ideal time for a pasture inventory. With vegetation dormant, the landscape is easier to read. Areas that were grazed too tightly, too frequently or too conveniently stand out clearly. Bare spots, heavy-use areas, thin stands, and paddocks that consistently received excess pressure are more visible now than during the growing season. Low-fertility zones, compaction, erosion, broomsedge patches and water access issues are easier to identify. Even in dormancy, tools such as the Pasture Condition Scoresheet (PCS) can be useful. While a full assessment is best completed during active growth, using the PCS in winter helps highlight trends, flag paddocks that need attention, and establish a baseline for spring decisions. This is not the month for fixing everything, but it is the month for understanding what will require attention when growth resumes.

This is also a good time to update soil tests, especially if more than four years have passed since the last sampling. Soil tests help prevent major missteps and indicate whether fertility is improving, declining, or holding steady. They can identify fields that would benefit from lime or a modest, targeted nutrient input. Winter visibility also makes it easier to evaluate fencing, while water lines and troughs deserve attention as slow leaks and frost-related issues tend to reveal themselves now.

Regardless of how any year unfolds, one principle remains constant: plants need rest. More rest leads to deeper roots, greater forage production, improved resilience, and fewer weeds. Weather may influence how long rest periods need to be, but a grazing system should be designed to allow adequate recovery under any conditions. January is the time to ask whether paddock size and layout truly support rest, if water placement allows consistent rotation and reasonable walking distances, whether stocking rate or stock density needs adjustment and which paddocks should receive priority for longer recovery when spring arrives.

If the year turns wet, rest protects soil structure. If it turns dry, rest protects roots. If it turns average, rest usually results in more forage than expected. Rest is one of the few management tools that never backfires.

Soil health forms the foundation for productive grazing, and winter often reveals its condition more clearly than summer. Healthy soils respond to consistent habits: keeping living roots as long as possible, maintaining soil cover with residue, promoting plant diversity, minimizing disturbance, and managing stock density with intention. Even dormant roots support early spring biological activity. Residue reduces erosion and moderates soil temperature swings. Soil under stockpiled forage is often warmer and less deeply frozen than soil in overly grazed areas with little cover, primarily because standing forage and sod insulate the soil and slow heat loss, while microbial activity continues at a reduced rate through winter. Diversity improves resilience and forage distribution, and thoughtful stock density helps limit selective grazing and encourage more uniform use.

Animal performance improves when pastures are in balance. Nutrition gaps, parasite pressure, and inconsistent gains are frequently tied less to supplements or dewormers and more to forage quality, quantity and recovery time. Livestock perform best when rotations provide a clean grazing horizon and when forage is neither too short nor overly mature. Integrated parasite management consistently outperforms calendar-based deworming. Regular rotation reduces exposure, maintaining adequate sward height keeps animals away from larval zones and selecting animals that tolerate parasite pressure strengthens the herd or flock over time.

Monitoring body condition through winter is also important. Losses can be difficult to detect under winter hair or wool, and small declines now often surface later as reduced conception rates or slower recovery once grass begins growing.

Through all of this, simplicity remains a strength. The temptation is either to overhaul the entire operation or to change nothing at all. Yet the grazing principles that worked decades ago remain sound today: maintain adequate residual, protect the soil with residue, match stocking rate to forage supply, keep animals moving, promote diversity, avoid overgrazing and observe the land closely. Reliable water access, functional fencing, balanced stocking rates and livestock suited to their environment matter far more than the latest gadget or formula. Grazing remains both art and science—observant, flexible and grounded in fundamentals.

It requires clear reflection and a willingness to make a few well-chosen adjustments that will pay dividends throughout the year. With refined goals and a strengthened system, the 2026 grazing season can begin on firm ground, regardless of what follows. It is not about maximizing a single grazing event but about optimizing the entire grazing season. Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

Dubois County SWCD Annual Meeting – February 3, . 2026, Jasper, IN – Doors Open 6 p.m. ET – Greg Brann is Keynote Speaker – For more information call 812-482-1171 Ext 3 or email DuboisSWCD@gmail.com. \$15 per person, please RSVP by Jan 16!



Northern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 6-7, 2026, Shipshewana, IN – For more information call 260-463-3166 x 3 or check at <https://lagrange-swcd.wixsite.com/lagrangeswcd/nigc>

Southern Indiana Grazing Conference – March 13, 2026, Shiloh Community Bldg, Odon, IN – Peter Byck, Greg Halich, Barry Fisher, and Peter Ballerstedt are speakers. For more information call 812-254-4780 Ext 3 or register at <https://sigc2026.eventbrite.com>



Indiana Forage Council Annual Meeting – March 12, 2026, Gasthof Restaurant, Montgomery, IN – 4 p.m. ET (call 812-254-4780 Ext 3 to register)

