# Grazing Bites™

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*Winter grazing works—but only if you protect crowns, plan recovery, and match animals to pastures.*

Winter months challenge livestock producers across the Midwest. Snow cover, temperature swings, and reliance on dormant or stockpiled forage often make winter grazing a necessity. In many cases, it is a far better option than moving animals into muddy lots or hauling additional feed. While winter grazing can work, understanding the physiological stress it places on forage plants—and planning for recovery—is critical to long-term pasture health.

For winter grazing to be sustainable, cool-season forages must be fully dormant before grazing begins. Grazing prior to dormancy places substantially more stress on plants because they continue attempting regrowth, drawing heavily on carbohydrate reserves until enough consecutive freezing days force true dormancy.

Dormancy in cool-season forages like tall fescue, orchardgrass, and clovers is a survival mechanism. As day length shortens and temperatures drop, leaf elongation slows or stops, new tillers are not initiated, and aboveground growth ceases. From a management standpoint, this creates the opportunity to graze without immediately forcing regrowth, which would otherwise draw heavily on stored carbohydrate reserves. One controlled defoliation after dormancy is generally tolerated; the plants can maintain their crowns and roots without severe depletion of reserves. However, dormancy does not mean inactivity. Roots and crowns continue to respire, fine roots naturally turn over, and tiny amounts of photosynthesis may occur during mild winter spells. This low-level metabolic activity relies on stored energy, meaning that repeated grazing over extended periods—even of dormant forage—gradually depletes the plant's reserves.

Continuous winter grazing quietly impacts forage plants in ways that often go unnoticed until spring. Protective lower leaves and residual stubble that insulate plant crowns from cold and desiccation are removed, exposing growing points to freeze–thaw cycles and wind stress. Carbohydrate reserves stored in roots and crowns are slowly drawn down to maintain viability. Buds that will initiate early spring growth may be clipped or damaged. Root systems are particularly vulnerable: even if plants appear "alive" aboveground, thin roots reduce water and nutrient uptake as soil temperatures warm, slowing regrowth and limiting the stand's ability to compete with weeds. For legumes, especially clovers, the impact is more pronounced because crowns are smaller, nitrogen-fixing nodules are sensitive to physical stress, and overall energy reserves are lower.

Despite these risks, winter grazing remains a practical strategy when responsibly managed. Protecting residual height is critical. Maintaining at least three to four inches of residual allows crowns to remain insulated, preserves some photosynthetic capacity during mild winter periods, and buffers the soil against extreme temperature swings. When residuals drop below this threshold, even dormant plants can experience significant stress, which often goes unnoticed until green-up. In situations where extended grazing is unavoidable, rotating animals, spreading winter pressure across multiple fields, and avoiding repeated grazing of the same patch year after year are essential strategies for long-term pasture health.

Recovery planning is just as important as managing grazing. In southern Indiana and much of the Midwest, late February is an ideal window for overseeding pastures that suffered from extended winter grazing. Cool-

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*Victor Shelton is a retired Agronomist/Grazing Specialist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). He continues to write Grazing Bites in his spare time from his property in southwest Indiana.*  *- Issue 217*

season legumes and grasses, such as red clover, white clover, and Italian ryegrass, can be planted before spring warmth fully arrives, giving seedlings time to establish and supplement the recovering stand. Italian ryegrass, particularly tetraploid varieties, establishes quickly, offers high-quality early spring forage, and can persist for one to two growing seasons under favorable conditions and appropriate management. Clover reseeding adds nitrogen to the system while helping restore diversity and resilience to mixed pastures. Timing and seeding technique are crucial. Shallow planting depths, ideally around ¼ inch, and light incorporation or controlled hoof traffic can improve seed-to-soil contact, enhancing germination without crushing crowns or seedlings. Fields that received heavier winter grazing may benefit from slightly higher seeding rates to compensate for crown loss and thin stands.

Animal species differences further influence both winter impact and recovery strategies. Mature beef cows exert the greatest pressure on dormant pastures due to their weight and selective grazing. They can compact soil, consume more residue, and clip crowns repeatedly, especially on palatable species like orchardgrass and young fescue shoots. Weaned calves, by contrast, are lighter and graze more uniformly, creating less compaction and preserving crowns and roots. Sheep are extremely light but graze remarkably close to the ground, which minimizes compaction but increases the risk of damaging crowns and lower growing points. Horses fall somewhere in between: they are highly selective, clip grass close to crowns, and can create patchy overgrazing even in pastures that appear healthy overall. Recognizing these differences allows producers to adjust stocking rates, rotation schedules, and recovery plans according to animal behavior.

Once seeded, practical recovery strategies should include protecting newly overseeded areas until seedlings reach at least a three to four leaf stage, maintaining adequate residual in remaining stands, and monitoring for uneven grazing patterns. For cows and horses, rotation is especially important to prevent further localized damage. Sheep and calves can be used strategically for light grazing or to press seed into soil, but care should be taken to avoid overexposure of crowns or seedlings. Fertility management also supports recovery: ensuring adequate phosphorus and potassium aids root development, while nitrogen applications can be timed once seedlings are established to boost growth without promoting premature growth or creating excessive competition from established perennials.

By combining careful winter grazing management, strategic overseeding, and animal-specific considerations, producers can maintain forage productivity through winter and into the next season. Pastures grazed in winter do not have to suffer long-term damage if carbohydrate reserves, crowns, and buds are protected, and recovery steps are implemented as soon as feasible. Recognizing the subtle, cumulative effects of winter grazing and planning for repair ensures that spring green-up is vigorous, stand density is preserved, and forage diversity is restored.

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

**Reminders & Opportunities**

**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)

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