

Grazing Bites™

May 2026

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I've spent many years around grazing livestock, and if there's one thing I've learned, it's this: good grazing management isn't about the system you call it. It's about how well you manage what's growing in front of you.

There are a lot of names out there: rotational grazing, continuous grazing, mob grazing, total grazing. I've seen each one done well, and I've seen each one done poorly. The real difference was never in the name. It was always in the management.

Grass doesn't grow on a schedule. It responds to weather, temperature, moisture and how it's been treated. If you're going to manage it well, you must pay attention to those same things, especially this time of year. In May, grass is growing fast, and it's easy to get ahead of yourself and move too quickly. Instead of sticking to a pre-set plan, watch what the plants are doing. Spring is where a lot of good intentions start to slip.

For me, it comes back to two simple ideas: residual and recovery. Residual is what you leave behind. Not based on the tallest plant you can find, but the shortest forage in front of you. That's what tells the real story. I've always found it helpful to just take a step back, look down and measure what's actually left. Sometimes I'll even use my boot to move things around a little and see it better. It doesn't take long to know if you stayed where you should have.

Leave enough leaf area, and the plant keeps working. Take too much, and you slow everything down. That affects root growth, soil cover and how quickly that pasture comes back. It also affects how that plant handles stress later in the season.

Recovery is the other half of the equation. Plants need time to rebuild, not just to grow back to a certain height, but to restore energy reserves and get back to a healthy state. That doesn't happen on a fixed number of days. It happens when the plant is ready.

Some years, that takes longer. Dry weather will stretch recovery out, and cool temperatures will too. Even in the spring, when things seem to be growing fast, not every paddock is ready at the same time. If you don't adjust for that, you'll end up grazing plants before they're ready, and that's where problems start.

Most of the issues I see in pastures don't come from a lack of rotation. They come from grazing too short, staying too long and coming back too soon. Spring is where most of those mistakes begin.

Rotation can help you manage those things, but it's just a tool. You can rotate and still overgraze. You can move livestock every day and still come back too soon. You can also leave animals in a larger area and do a decent job if you're paying attention. The key is not how often you move livestock, but whether the plants are getting what they need.



*Manage the forage;
everything else follows.*

This time of year, one of the hardest things to do is slow down. There's a tendency to try to control the grass, but that occasionally leads to moving too fast or taking too much and not leaving enough behind. Sometimes the better approach is to let part of the farm get ahead of you.

That might mean letting some paddocks grow taller than you're used to, skipping areas and coming back later, or grazing a few paddocks a little tighter than normal to buy time. Those decisions aren't mistakes. They're management decisions. The goal is to keep the whole system functioning, not to make every paddock look the same on any given day.

Another thing I've learned is to look at the pasture as a whole. You don't have to be perfect in every paddock every time. There are going to be times when you graze something a little tighter than you planned, whether you're trying to slow things down in the spring, preparing for frost seeding, or the cattle just didn't cooperate that day.

What matters is what you do next. If that paddock gets the recovery it needs, it usually comes back just fine. The system can handle a mistake or a short-term decision, but the problem is when it becomes a pattern.

If multiple paddocks are being grazed too short, or if you're staying too long or coming back before they've recovered, then the system starts to break down. You'll see it in the plants first as desirable species thin out, regrowth slows, and bare ground starts to show up. From there it affects everything else, including soil health, water movement and animal performance. You can't fix that with a different grazing system. You fix it by managing residual and recovery.

Over the years, I've gotten in the habit of checking things as I go. I look at the shortest plants, scuff a manure pile with my boot to see what's underneath, and pay attention to how evenly things are being used. None of them are complicated, but it tells you a lot if you're willing to look.

In May, those small observations matter even more because this is when you set the stage for the rest of the grazing season. If you take too much now or move back too soon, you'll be dealing with it all summer. If you manage it right, things tend to fall into place.

The land will tell you what's going on if you slow down enough to notice. That's really what grazing management comes down to. It's not about following a plan perfectly, but about making good decisions as conditions change.

If you keep enough residual and allow adequate recovery, most of the other things people worry about start to take care of themselves. Soil improves, water soaks in better, plants stay healthier and more productive, and animals perform the way they should.

Get it right in May, and the rest of the season will get a whole lot easier. It all starts with the grass. It is not about maximizing a single grazing event, but about optimizing the entire grazing season. Keep on grazing.

Reminders & Opportunities

Pasture Ecology – June 24, 2026, Examine complex relationships between livestock, forages, and soil.
SIPAC - 11371 Purdue Farm Rd., Dubois, IN

