

Grazing Bites™

June 2026

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This spring has been a good reminder that no two grazing seasons are exactly alike. Growth started early this year after having the warmest April on record. Cool-season grasses took off quickly, fields greened quicker than normal, grazing started earlier and seedheads emerged sooner than many expected. In some pastures, it has already been difficult to stay ahead of the growth curve.



By this point in the season, we are usually approaching peak growth for cool-season forages. In most years, we have already produced roughly two-thirds of our annual cool-season forage production by early June. From that point forward, management often shifts more toward managing regrowth, maintaining residuals and building or utilizing stockpile. Because of that, I generally expect to have some excess forage during the spring flush. If forage supplies are already running short now, there is a good chance the forage-to-livestock balance may be getting too tight for the remainder of the grazing season. That does not necessarily mean management is poor. Weather patterns, earlier growth, winter feeding pressure and delayed recovery on some paddocks may all contribute. It's just an early warning sign. You should have excess pasture in early June!

If we are able to keep every pasture perfectly short, even and vegetative through spring by grazing only, there is a good chance we are not allowing enough recovery or enough surplus growth during the most productive part of the season.

On many farms this spring, fields were already moving into reproductive growth before livestock can adequately utilize them and earlier than normal. Under those conditions, more management becomes almost necessary if the goal is maintaining forage quality and keeping grasses more vegetative throughout the summer, especially in properly stocked or lighter stocked systems. That creates an interesting challenge in grazing management. The challenge is managing that excess without allowing forage quality and grazing efficiency to decline too far.

This can be accomplished to a degree by strip-grazing forages in smaller allocations, which often increases the recovery period and buys a little time if grazed down closer to stop grazing heights. Removing roughly the top third of the canopy can temporarily slow maturity and maintain animal performance, but once grasses fully shift into reproductive growth, top grazing alone often becomes less effective at controlling maturity. If you have enough animal units to keep rotations extremely tight through spring and are ready to start back at the first paddock again very quickly without skipping anything, there is a good chance you are stocked a bit heavy for the remainder of the season.

Clipping, though I hate needing to do it, can be very beneficial if timing is right. The earlier clipping happens, usually before seedheads fully mature, the better the pasture often responds. Regrowth tends to stay leafier, forage quality remains higher longer and the pasture usually recovers more aggressively afterward. If cattle can graze it first, even lightly, it is all the better because it allows nutrient cycling through the animals while reducing the amount of material that must be clipped mechanically. You also

want to clip before there is too much bulk material present and clip as high as possible, so you are not laying much material on top of the solar panel you are trying to boost.

At that point, one of the more practical solutions is usually some combination of clipping, tighter grazing density or intentional stockpiling rather than trying to perfectly graze every acre at once. Sometimes the most effective move is sacrificing a few paddocks early. Removing excess forage as hay or clipping it before seedheads are fully mature can reset the system and allow the remaining paddocks to stay vegetative longer. That said, I'm not a fan of hay making off pastures.

I have become increasingly selective about which acres are harvested mechanically, if at all. Fields that are easily accessible and can be replenished efficiently are usually the better candidates for hay production or ones that, for one reason or another, can't be grazed. More remote paddocks or fields that are difficult to access are often better utilized through grazing whenever possible. Every bale removes exports nutrients, carbon and organic material from that field. Grazing systems conserve nutrients far more efficiently because livestock recycle much of what they consume directly back onto the pasture.

Where livestock numbers are lower, another useful approach can be intentionally designating certain areas for later stockpiling while focusing grazing pressure harder on the acres that remain in the active rotation. But even stockpiled forage benefits from management. Allowing mature forage to become excessively rank or shaded can reduce both quality and future regrowth.

Still, every time I clip a pasture, I realize I am changing more than just forage quality. Leaving taller structure and occasional mature growth provides benefits too. Grassland birds, pollinators, insects and wildlife often prefer some unevenness in the canopy. A pasture managed like a lawn may maximize short-term forage quality and utilization, but nature rarely functions as a uniform lawn. If the livestock have done a decent job of keeping forages vegetative and seed production in check, then clipping sometimes can't be justified. Walk and look at it before automatically clipping. Make sure there is a reason to clip. You have to determine your own threshold, but for me, once a pasture starts getting roughly thirty percent or more mature or stemmy, clipping becomes more likely.

Both research and field observations suggest healthy grazing systems are not always perfectly uniform systems. Some variation in height, occasional seedheads, residual cover, and even a little "messiness" may actually be signs that biological processes are functioning fairly well. It also indicates that we have some staging going on, in other words, some diversity in maturity which is really needed, especially from paddock to paddock.

This year's early spring simply reminded us sooner than usual that adaptive grazing is never completely controlled by a calendar or rigid formula. The pasture itself still has to help make the decisions. 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

