

Grazing Bites

February 2018

Victor Shelton, NRCS State Agronomist/Grazing Specialist

I have a hard time trying to figure out how anyone can be bored or lacking something to do. I recently heard someone say “What am I going to do with my extra time today?” Seriously? I'm usually lacking one of three things when I am up against getting a project done; time, energy, or money...and sometimes all three! The older I get, the more I realize that time is the most precious.

I am an avid reader. My wife would say I'm obsessed with books. I quite often read two or more at the same time. Not simultaneously, but I don't wait to finish one before starting another. There is always more to be learned and understood. The more I know, the more I know that I don't know. That's a vicious cycle, or predicament, or perhaps a curse, which to me means more books, another course, another conference, or a one on one conversation with someone that I can learn from. But my point is, time spent learning is always a good use of time.

I really enjoy going to conferences, especially when authors of books I've read are there. Not only are there opportunities to listen to and talk with speakers and authors, but some of the best highlights are the side or during dinner conversations. I recently sat between two men, one from Utah raising cattle on literally nothing but rock and an Australian raising Friesian Brahma crosses on mixed pasture. It wasn't long before the topic of drought came up. We all could relate in different degrees.

It might seem like an odd time to think about drought, but it should be part of your contingency plan; meaning you need to plan ahead for it and not wait until it happens.

Allan Savory is well known for his holistic approach to planning for droughts and for his solution to reversing desertification, by building resiliency. He always makes me stop and think. I totally agree with him that ruminant livestock are needed to maintain or restore vegetative cover, especially in fragile environments.

Fragile environments are found in more arid areas where plant material tends to be more “brittle” or crumbly dry, especially when not actively growing. In more humid areas like the Midwest, we live in a non-brittle environment. Higher humidity, maintains moisture better and we have faster decay because of it. Even our dry material generally has some moisture. Brittle environments are certainly subject to possible desertification if not managed correctly. Under grazing is as detrimental as over grazing. Having animals present helps to maintain order, diversity, and life, above and below the ground.

The real secret to building resiliency is retaining the rainfall you get, maintaining and building soil organic matter, and keeping the soil covered and diverse plants growing. Does that sound familiar?

I recently heard Savory speak and enjoyed listening to him. He said most things are very complex and we usually try and fix them with simple single actions that normally fail. He suggests to step back and look at the system as a whole and also include social aspects. Ironically, the answer is quite often, still very simple. Keep it covered, keep it growing, and allow for adequate rest.



Drought didn't slow this remnant switchgrass plant down...

Going back to my discussion with the Aussie and the Utah rancher, one of our common factors of the drought is the blessing of having some warm season forage to graze during hot dry conditions. In the drought of 2012, producers with any warm season forage thrived much better than ones without. The deep penetrating, water seeking, marvelous roots of these grasses certainly help to heal and build the soil and provide forage when the cool season forages go dormant.

You can somewhat gauge the severity of a drought mainly by the lack of rainfall, but eventually you have lower soil moisture, and lower humidity to a degree. That reduction of humidity can create a pseudo-brittle environment for a short time. Cool season forages absolutely need to be rested during these periods or you can have huge plant loss, especially of desirable species. Warm season forages thrive quite well through these conditions and provide needed forage during these dry periods. They also thought have numerous benefits for normal years. Because they grow slightly later in the season, they can buy you valuable time in the spring. Earlier species, such as switchgrass, can be taken for hay, in a prime vegetative stage, much later than most cool season forages. Too much cool season forage hay is cut way past its peak quality vegetative stage and harvested closer to maturity with much lower nutritional value. You might get slightly higher tonnage harvesting it later and mature, but you trade off quality and usually animal intake too resulting in more wastage.

Why should you even think about the inclusion of some warm season forages? The same reason that you stockpile forages. The same reason you graze annuals and occasionally corn residue. It provides a feed source for ruminant livestock they can harvest themselves and most importantly, it is not an added expense or input for the operation. Anytime a grazing animal can graze with ample high quality feed in front of them and you not carrying something to them, you are generally saving money and improving your bottom line. It's not the size of weaned calves or the gallons of milk in the tank that make or break an operation, it's the inputs.

In a few short weeks, you have the opportunity to listen and talk with some of the most leading experts on utilizing forages efficiency, reducing or eliminating summer forage slump, and best management for tall fescue at the Southern Indiana Grazing Conference. I hope to see you there!

Until then, remember "Time don't wait on nobody," and the best way to make a change is to just start. Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities



Indiana Forage Council Annual Meeting & Seminar – February 19, 2018, 6:00 p.m. at the Abe Martin Lodge, Brown County State Park. (4:30 p.m. is the Annual Meeting for members and interested guests) Meal and program starts at 6 p.m. Please RSVP by February 12th to Jason Tower, towerj@purdue.edu or 812-678-4427. Dinner and seminar is \$20. Josh Cox and Dave Fischer are presenters.



Southern Indiana Grazing Conference (SIGC) – March 7, 2018, Crane, IN – Speakers include Dr. Allen Williams, Dr. Pat Keyser, and Dr. Ray Smith. For more information contact the Daviess County SWCD at 812-254-4780, Ext 3, email Toni Allison dc.swcd@daviess.org, or visit

<http://www.daviesscoswcd.org/index.php/sigc> or <https://www.facebook.com/SouthernIndianaGrazingConference>

More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/in/technical/landuse/pasture/>