

Grazing Bites

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Nobody is short of moisture. I look forward to just having firm footing again. When you can't walk across the yard without splashing water up on you, it's wet.

The livestock are also getting tired of the wet conditions and continuous showers. I've had several calls from people looking for hay. This is a really bad time to be running out. The latest call was someone who had just fed their last bales and did not want to turn out on pasture yet until they had enough forage growth. That is exactly what I like to hear. If you turn out too early, the grass never gets much of a chance to get good leaf cover. Grazing too early in the spring does nothing but remove that solar panel the plants need to start building sugar and growing new roots. The forages really need to be able to canopy and get a good start before animals begin removing the top growth otherwise production will be reduced.



A little bit of residual left from last year is a good thing!

It is still better to find and feed poor hay and supplement it to meet nutritional needs than to start grazing too early, especially when it is wet. Soybean hulls or corn gluten can make good supplemental feed. Neither seems to drop the pH of the rumen as much as starchy grain. This is important, because if you are going to be relying on forages and rumen pH is too low, it kills off enzyme-producing flora needed to break down the cellulose in forages.

Back to the wetness factor. Fields that were grazed down tight last fall or over winter as stockpiled forage will not have adequate standing dry matter or fiber available and are not the best fields to start grazing early anyway. If there is little or no above-ground plant growth or residual, then there is not going to be a lot of root mass below the surface, especially if those forages were kept short for long periods of time. This scenario, combined with extremely wet conditions, is a quick way to totally pug up and severely damage a field, making it look like it has been plowed with hooves. Grazing too early and under wet conditions reduces desirable plant populations, creates compaction, and opens up the soil for erosion by reducing soil cover, which provides opportunities for numerous weeds and warmer, less productive soils. It is just better to wait for good grazing conditions.

Those fields grazed short last fall will also lack sufficient fiber to go with all the washy high-water, high-protein forage that will come on with first growth. All ruminant livestock need to balance the carbon-nitrogen ratio in their rumen to maintain that mat. If they don't, then they will not perform the way you want them to and have less gain and less milk production. The plants just go through their system faster than they can effectively utilize it. You know what means--don't stand too close behind those cows! You've heard me say that several times before. If you don't believe me, well, I'll let you test that.

If you would look at the manure consistency during that time period, it could be very thin, almost watery, not that pudding consistency that is ideal for the rumen.

Fields that do not have adequate dry matter to go along with lush new growth will need to be supplemented to keep the animals in balance. This is a good time to put out some low quality hay, baled corn stalks or even straw because if they need it, they will eat it.

I hope you have been able to keep at least one or two fields with some stockpiled forage for early spring use. Stockpiled forages left from the previous season mixed with that new growth grass makes for a nicely balanced sward for grazing in the spring and a really nice place to calve. There is little to no mud, and good quality, balanced forage to eat. If you have never tried it, you will wonder why you haven't been doing it.

These rains will eventually provide some really nice pasture. Just remember, don't get in too big of a hurry to start grazing. I know, it takes about all the patience you can muster up. Ideally, forages should be at least 6 to 10 inches tall before grazing begins. You will not want to remove too much and leave at least 4 to 5 inches to keep that solar panel active and the plant growing, especially for most cool-season grasses, such as orchardgrass and tall fescue. That stop-grazing height is the shortest forage in the field, not the tallest left behind. This is the time of year when you just need to keep moving forward once you start grazing. Generally, the faster the grass is growing, the faster the cows should be moving forward. This helps to keep the forages under control. As the forage growth starts slowing down, then the rotation should also slow down which will allow for longer rest periods before being grazed again.

It will soon seem like you have more forage than you can use at the moment, but resist the urge to cut too much for hay. Long wet springs often are followed by hot, dry summers. The more forage residual left behind, the more drought resistant the pasture will be. I know it sounds a bit crazy talking about droughts when you're standing in water, but it has happened, and very well could again and it's best to be prepared. Besides, do you need all the hay that you produce? Pasture yields, when managed well, can actually out-yield hay fields with the same fertility. Why? Because you are leaving adequate live plant residual (green leaf) behind to grow back quicker and induce some more tillering. Haying also promotes less diversity and increased diversity usually means increased yield and over a greater period of time.

I recommend stopping to think about how many days you are relying on hay in your operation. I've heard Jim Gerrish say numerous times; paraphrasing him, "*Winter feed costs are the main expense for most cow-calf producers...period.*" "*We feed hay to the extent that we make hay.*" "*Cow producers in Michigan, Missouri and Mississippi all feed hay for about 130 days a year.*" It would pay us all to seriously think about how much we feed. Do the higher livestock numbers pay for all of the extra inputs required to keep them? Could you make more with less; that is something to pencil out on one of these rainy days. I would encourage you to shoot for 60 days and no more than 90. It is possible, with some planning, to accomplish it with less also.

Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

Stock Dog Workshops – April 27th, 28th, and 29th, 2018 – For more information contact Denice Rackley at denice.r@lycos.com or 605-842-6321. **Special Free Demonstration** - April 26th, 2 pm, Switzerland County.

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/>

