

Grazing Bites

June 2017

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I mentioned last month I couldn't believe how much forage growth we have already this year due to the rains. The situation hasn't changed a whole lot until lately. The challenge now is trying to get forages under control and harvesting any needed forage for later use.

I am running late in getting this issue of Grazing Bites out, even with several reminders. I feel the same way about my forage control so far this year; it reminds me visually every day that I'm behind schedule. There are just some years, and this is one of them, forage growth is early and dense, especially where nutrients are readily available and where growth has not been hindered by excessive grazing last fall or early spring.

As I've traveled around the state lately, I have seen quite a range in pasture growth, from almost no growth left at this time, to the appearance that there are no grazing animals on the place! This is nothing new, but sadly, if you don't have much or any significant amount of forage in your pastures right now, you have a problem. Because if you don't have it now, what will you have after it turns hot and dry?

I was told by a producer once after walking his pastures with him, "I know there's not much out here right now, I baled it all so I wouldn't run out." It was early June and the cows were still eating hay. This reminds me of confined dairy operations where everything is carried to the cow. May I remind you that the cow has four feet (pretty much 4-foot drive), a built-in harvester, and even a manure spreader! They are supposed to be working for us, not us for them.



Time to clip, mow, or ideally strip graze.

We should first graze as much as possible to reduce inputs. When the cows are grazing, inputs are typically low, especially if nutrient levels and soil health is good. If a wheel is turning, we are spending money. If forages can be directly harvested by the cow and the nutrients from the manure placed back where they came from automatically, it is pretty efficient. I've heard the argument, "I can mow and bale it more efficiently than the cow." True, you are an efficient harvester of bulk forage and with modern equipment and management, the harvest efficiency can be very high. But, there are a lot of wheels turning, then there is storage efficiency, and then feeding efficiency, and then nutrients that need to be replaced or returned to the soil. I'm sorry, but I am certain the cow can do it better. I will back pedal for a second to say, balage generally has a high storage and feeding efficiency, certainly higher than most dry hay, but there are also extra inputs too.

Ideally, hay should probably be used more as an insurance policy or as part of a contingency plan rather than being a major part of the operation. Insurance coverage is important; so it having enough hay in storage for time periods when you may not be able to graze is a good idea. However, consider the wisdom of Jim Gerrish who states, "A producer will feed as much hay as he puts up; the more he puts up, the more he will feed." This is the truth. I've watched farmers cut so much hay that they had to feed hay at the same time.

I've seen several places where the forages are starting to mature and there is a lot of seed head formation. So, if you are losing the battle on trying to keep forages from maturing, graze hard and fast, clip as you need to before the seed heads matures (dries) preferably, and then strip graze at high intensity for short durations the rest. You will be surprised how much more grass you produce. Cut for hay as early as possible, but only if you have to and for what you really need. Again, keep the cows employed, they don't mind.

Looking at it slightly differently; we can spend a lot of our time sitting on a tractor, which almost always means more tractor time later, or we can spend some of that time doing more management of the cows and fields, observing them, managing the forages, and greatly reducing inputs.

We may have moisture right now, but it could turn dry and stay dry. Rainfall eventually balances itself out. Now is the time to be thinking about those possible dry periods. Keep all tall cool season forages, such as tall fescue, bromes, and orchardgrass no shorter than four inches. This is what I call the STOP grazing height. Re-enter and start grazing again when forages have reached at least eight to ten inches and then remove again when the shortest plants are four inches. That residual material is enough to maintain the solar panel and keep the plants growing and producing.



Maintain stop grazing heights to maintain that solar panel and keep plants producing!

Lastly, it is a good time to be planting summer annuals. Summer annuals including sorghum-sudan, sudangrass, millets, brassicas (turnips and the like) and a host of other plants that make for good summer grazing during the cool season forage slump periods. Planting annuals will allow perennials to rest longer and maintain more growth that can boost fall production. Annuals also make good forage when renovating pastures, especially if you want to eliminate most or all of the existing vegetation. It gives you a nice window to grow something that can be utilized and time to observe when the field is ready to reestablish and void of the previous lower quality forage. Perennial cool season forages can then be replanted starting in early August through mid-September.

Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

Grazing 102 – June 23-24, 2017, Dubois, IN, for more information go to:

<https://www.purdue.edu/newsroom/releases/2017/Q2/producers-are-invited-to-grazing-102-course-offered-by-purdue-extension.html>

Indiana Forage Tours – Late July 2017 - Sites TBD in Southern Indiana, more information later.

Grazing for the Future Conference – August 17-18, 2017, Madison, Indiana. Registration Link:

<https://grazing-conference.eventbrite.com>

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/>