

Grazing Bites

125th Issue

June 2018

Victor Shelton, NRCS State Agronomist/Grazing Specialist

I am running a bit late this month. What can I say; busy times. May was a very interesting month. Forages went from barely growing, to boot stage, to seed production in what it seemed about ten days. I don't believe I've ever seen forages jump quite like this. We were shy on growing degree days up to that point, then with ample sunshine and some heat, there was "compensatory" growth.

Forages were stressed this spring. Though I have seen some really nice pastures and hay fields this year, those numerous cloudy and cool days earlier this year have played a bit of a toll on yield. Quite a bit of first cutting hay was not the quality it usually is. When grass especially is stressed, its first defense or survival mechanism is usually to produce seed.

This super fast need to produce seed possibly makes leaf production play second fiddle. Will it catch up? Will it make up this production? Good questions. The answer, which always seems to include "it depends" is somewhat dependent on factors, such as moisture, fertility and management.

Most of Indiana has received some greatly needed rainfall. Small portions of the state were already under the "abnormally dry" drought monitor status category. Restoring moisture reserves and then maintaining them, can certainly lend to increased forage production. We can help by not overgrazing and maintaining good soil cover to reduce evaporation and increase infiltration when it does rain.

Adequate fertility is always a good thing. That doesn't necessarily mean that you need to apply a lot of commercial fertilizer, but when nutrients are sufficient or better, you are more likely to have optimal yields if all other conditions are favorable.

Managing grazing livestock to ensure the likelihood of nutrient cycling for future growth is a good place to start. Livestock can move nutrients. The bigger the pasture or allotment, the higher the chance of movement. If water, mineral or shade (as summer progresses) is a distance from where animals are grazing, the greater the possibility that nutrients will be harvested and deposited where they are less needed.

Back to fertilizing, with slightly reduced yields early this year, there may be some advantages to applying a little nitrogen now to help boost growth. I would still limit the amount, especially in pastures where ample legumes are desired. Too much nitrogen can create a lot of competition for legumes from fast grass growth. Don't forget, fertility for macro nutrients should be based on soil tests or at least it is a good place to start.

Lastly, forage management absolutely has an impact on production. To achieve all potential growth, you do need to manage and maintain a good solar panel. You want as much sunlight on the plant's solar "collectors" as possible for maximum production. That means you need to maintain sufficient green leaf area and that will be a challenging feat this year due to the forage maturing rapidly. Generally, I'm not a huge advocate of clipping, at least not to the degree of some, unless it is needed to serve a good purpose and not solely for aesthetics. A good reason would include weed control and this year it would likely be for vegetative management.



Forage is maturing exponentially fast. Extra management may be needed this year to maintain quality and production...

With the fast maturing growth, it will be very difficult to stay ahead of the forages. If you want to emphasize regrowth and production, you may need to clip some of the pastures to try and set back seedhead production and maintain the forage in a more vegetative stage, which is more ideal for solar collecting. This also helps to shift energy from seed production back to leaf production. Letting plants mature increases root growth and in the long run, the soil's organic matter. You don't want to slow this process of root growth too much, so you will need to continue to maintain adequate stop-grazing heights and clip no lower than needed to encourage the plant to remain more vegetative.

I usually think of June as the month to judge stocking rates. If there is an over abundance of pasture forage that has not been grazed or even top grazed, then you may be slightly understocked unless you are planning for a lot of stockpiled forage. If you are already short of forage and any pastures appear to be overgrazed, then most likely you are overstocked and the rest of the growing/grazing season will be challenging. It will be harder to judge this year due to some reduced early growth and the inability to accurately account for potential growth for the remaining season. By mid-June, we normally have achieved about two-thirds of our potential forage growth and we have not accomplished that yet or at least I hope we haven't.

Hay production is quite often the first thing that comes to mind for most producers in this situation, especially in a closed system where hay is often harvested off some pasture acres. Hay removal means nutrient removal, increased evaporation and quite often slower regrowth particularly when dry afterwards. Fertility will need to be checked this year to boost post hay forage growth. It would be advantageous to not mow too close unless conditions are favorable for fast regrowth or second cuttings and/or post grazing may be more challenging and limited unless moisture and fertility can be maintained.

I recently had a conversation pertaining to forage quality of hay pre or post our recent rains. Everyone needs a certain amount of hay because it is good insurance and usually needed for most systems. I also believe that when opportunity lends itself, *make hay while the sun shines!* So, would there be a difference in the analysis of hay cut early under dry conditions compared to cutting post a rainfall? If all factors such as forage species, varieties, fertility, and hay production are the same, there may not be a lot of difference, except for the fact that the forage is maturing exponentially fast and of which can quickly effect total digestible nutrients and there is a good chance that being under drier conditions earlier may have induced slightly higher brix due mainly to less water, slightly higher concentrations of nutrients including carbohydrates, protein, and lipids.

Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

National Forage Week – June 17-23, 2018 <http://nationalforageweek.org/>

Purdue Forage Management Day – August 9, 2019 - Feldun – Purdue Ag Center in Bedford. Flyer for all the Purdue DTC trainings can be found at: https://ag.purdue.edu/agry/Documents/2018_DTC_BROCHURE.pdf

Preliminary topics for the training are going to be:

- Stand Establishment of Coated and Uncoated Red Clover and Alfalfa
- Sensory and Laboratory Analysis of Hay and Silage
- Replacement Beef Heifers Preference for BMR or Normal Sorghum-Sudangrass, Pearl Millet and Sudangrass
- Recommendations Regarding Fertilization of Forages with Sulfur
- Fence and Water Options for Livestock
- Value of a Heavy Use Area Pad

7th National Grazing Lands Conference – December 2-5, 2018, Reno, Nevada.
“Take the Gamble Out of Grazing.”

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/>

