

Grazing Bites

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It is amazing how much things can change in just a month. A month ago there was certainly still some concern if we would get enough rain for fall planted annuals and rejuvenation of perennial forages. Today, I'm looking for a dry period to get a few things done and watching the grass grow as if it were May. I've gone from mowing my yard every four to five weeks whether it needed it or not, to mowing it about every four to five days...but for livestock producers; that is a good thing! Though rain has blessed us in most of Indiana, the effects of the drought are not completely over, nor are our subsoil and aquifers replenished; all in time.



Forages have really rebound. We have seen this before, but it is still quite amazing to watch unfold. There is absolutely more production where livestock were not allowed to overgraze. On one particular side by side comparison, with assumed like fertility, there was about 900 pounds difference in the regrowth between an overgrazed site versus a rotated site with adequate stop grazing heights maintained. That is just the baseline difference. When you add in long term differences in organic matter, lower soil temperatures during the critical months, longer rest periods with more than ample cover left behind, the differences increase even more. Hmm, an extra 900+ pounds available this fall, with high hay prices and short availability; priceless.

A lot of the fall regrowth this year is extremely lush. So lush that much of it either needs to obtain a bit more fiber before being grazed or hopefully grazed with a little bit of leftover dry material in it. It is not as washy as some new spring grass, but some of it is not that far behind it, especially if the fields were fertilized late summer or early fall. The rumen needs to be able to maintain a mat for proper absorption of nutrients. Quick test – look at the manure piles – cattle manure should be the consistency of pudding, not thinner, not heavier. Too thin, add dry matter...just make it available, the cows know what they need.

Now, just because there is “new found” green grass out there that we were not sure we would see again earlier this year, does not mean we should just forget other grazing options and go straight back to grazing those pastures at the first sign of green...ideally...they still need rest. The best scenario would be to allow them to grow until they go dormant again which is probably still a month away, but I know that is not going to happen in most cases this year. It is October. Cooler nights and shorter days are starting to really affect forage regrowth. Cool-season grasses start slowing down growth and increase storage of carbohydrates in the stem bases, rhizomes and/or roots. Until these plants go dormant, they will continue to build carbohydrate reserves, slowly grow leaves and develop next year's first tillers. The more times regrowth is allowed to be grazed, the higher the potential for a weaker plant in the spring. Plants with no rest this fall could struggle to survive the winter, leading towards a thinner, weedier, less productive stand next spring.

Most of these cool-season grasses are “dormant” after receiving a good freeze...but not always. If they are still growing, they are not dormant. South of I-70, this can often be November. If you are shy on pasture, then you might want to consider feeding some hay for a while to allow the forages to actually grow rather than continuing to graze them...there is a lot of poor hay out there...might be better to utilize some of it now feeding some of the broccoli and saving some of the ice cream for later when nutritionally needed. The first 30-60 days after harvest is the best time period for corn residue grazing when soil conditions are favorable. Spring calving cows are the best choice for grazing the residue. If time allows, it would be advisable to plant a cover-crop after grazing, especially on any rolling ground. This cover-crop might contribute to some early spring grazing if soil conditions allow it. Cereal rye can usually be planted up to November 1st in most of the state.

I am still surprised how much extremely thin stand of forages I’m seeing being cut for hay. If these are grazable, then you would be money ahead to just graze these areas instead of enduring the costs associated with putting it up as hay (fuel, labor, machinery costs, removal of nutrients, etc.). Even with today’s hay prices, I’m not sure you can pencil it out, but if you can...good for you. If you can hold off grazing at least some of these nice fall regrowth pastures, especially ones with tall fescue, then there will be lots of grazing opportunities for you this fall and winter.

Once you do start grazing “dormant” cool-season grasses, it would be to your advantage to strip graze them allocating only small increments at a time just like feeding hay. Tall fescue holds its nutritional value the best for long term winter grazing. Not overgrazing at this point will also help jump-start the forages in the spring and also help with weed suppression next year. Ideally, three to four inches of residue should always be left. Especially after a drought year, we don’t want to overstress our perennial forages and as a part of a contingency plan...more cover, higher stop grazing heights, even in the winter, are always best.

Summer annual warm-season grasses such as sudangrass or sorghum-sudangrass hybrids often have some late season value, but caution needs to be taken utilizing these forages this time of year.

Once frosted, these forages produce a cyanide containing compound commonly called prussic acid. It is the same compound that is produced by these same plants under stressed conditions, (such as drought) and is found in stressed Johnsongrass. Once frosted, this plant quickly starts shutting down and prussic acid is produced. Livestock should be removed from these forages for 10-14 days to allow for the forages to “dry down” and the prussic acid to dissipate before grazing again. Frosted sudangrass or sorghum-sudangrass hybrids can be harvested for balage right after being frosted and later fed as long as they are allowed their normal fermentation process time period of three or four weeks. Frosted areas could be only “pockets” in a field to start with. Any regrowth from the base of the plant after a frost can also be very high in prussic acid. If in doubt about nitrates or prussic acid – test before feeding or grazing!

It is better, keep on grazing!

Mark your Calendar!

NE Indiana Pasture Walks - Pasture walks in the NE corner of Indiana the 2nd Thursday of each month from 1 PM till 3 to 4 or until done. Contact LaGrange County SWCD (260)463-5200 x3 for more information



5th National Conference on Grazing Lands – December 9-12, 2012; Orlando, Florida. For more information, go to <http://www.glci.org/5NCGL.html> A few featured speakers will be Temple Grandin, Fred Provenza and Kit Pharo.

Indiana Grazing Conferences –

Southern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 6th, 2013;

Northern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 1-2, 2013; more details in

November issue.

Livestock, Forage & Grain Forum - February 11, 2013, JW Marriott, Indianapolis - Registration opens December 1st – more details coming.