

Grazing Bites

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I've been enjoying the early green forage and getting livestock back on fresh pasture. The forage is a bit earlier than average and, at least in my neck of the woods, rainfall hasn't been lacking and is now a bit ahead of the norm. If the sun decides to start shining on a regular basis bringing a little heat, I expect the spring explosion of grass to happen soon!



In meadows vast, chaos brews, cows roam wild, no rules they choose.

Livestock producers certainly graze their livestock in a wide array of management schemes. Most are workable to a degree, but then often fall short on efficiency, production or environmentally. Some type of game plan is always ideal – even when we know that some of the rules of the game may change for us.

Pasture's amuck, their chaos sows, trampled paths where no order goes.

Just opening up the gate and having a short conversation with each ruminant as it passes through with instructions stating, “Please graze evenly; eat some broccoli with the ice-cream; start on one end and slowly work your way across the pasture to not soil forage for the next day; please don't graze the clover to the ground; and if possible, please disperse your urine and feces evenly behind you,” just won't work!

Instead, all heads go down as soon as the gate opens, a few tails stand straight up signaling absolute delight and excitement, and the new season grazing season is initiated with no regard to the simply explained rules of order they were asked to follow.

The ruminant livestock only have one thing in mind as grazing is initiated for the season – consume the best forage possible in front of them as quickly as possible before the animal beside them gets it and get their fill so they can take a leisurely nap and ruminate for a while.

Most ruminants spend about eight hours a day grazing if ample forage is available and pretty much the rest of the day is spent just resting and ruminating. It sounds like quite a life and honestly, it is. If I spent a third of my time eating, I'd be fat and sassy and sprawled out somewhere too!

Back to the management – we can't leave it up to the cows. They know how to eat, but they are not the best managers of forage and frankly, sometimes I'm not either! It is important to have a game plan and stick to that game plan the best you can. Forages are not going to wait on anyone any more than the cows are going to listen to instructions. The grazing livestock are the forage management tools – not the managers. You need to utilize the grazing livestock to manage the forage.

One good method of managing growth is keeping the livestock moving onto new allocations on a very regular basis – moving to a new allocation every three days or ideally a lot less – like daily. That is actually more difficult for the human managers to understand than the livestock themselves. They appreciate a new fresh amount of forage every day. I'm sure there is at least one animal in the bunch that would tell you if they could “Fresh is always better – you have no idea who may have stepped there and did what!” With these short moves, enough forage should be allocated to supply that time frame without the fear of overgrazing it. That can be challenging, especially when there are highly desired forages mixed with less

desirable forages. Generally, the shorter the grazing period, the smaller the allocation, and the more competition from other grazing animals – the more evenly it is grazed and with less selectivity.

When they eat dominantly the desirable species and avoid the less desirable species, the upper hand is often then given to the undesirables which slowly increases their presence. This is especially obvious with the early spring yellow flowered buttercup – horses will avoid it at all costs and pasture will quickly be taken over from it if not controlled.

Now, getting to the question on how much forage should be removed per grazing event. There are choices to be made and sometimes those rules of engagement have to be changed in the middle of the game.

I really like top grazing, at least at a minimum, the first time around. Usually this entails allowing the grazing livestock to remove about one-third of the forage, which is usually the top portion of the plant, thus the name. This method helps to keep the vegetation under control and buys you some time for the forages to recover before grazing again. I find that with this method, you are often back to where you started a little quicker and that is not really a bad thing as long as the plants have recovered and are ready to be grazed again.

In a grazing system, "fully recovered" refers to the state of a pasture or forage area when it has regrown sufficiently after being grazed by livestock. This means that the vegetation has reached a stage where it has regained its desired height and density, allowing grazing animals to return without causing long-term damage to the plants or the overall health of the pasture. The term indicates that the forage has replenished its nutrients and energy reserves, enabling it to support another grazing cycle effectively.

The next management option is to provide a similar allocation of forage but let the livestock graze the forages to an appropriate stop grazing height. Stop grazing heights are the shortest forages left, not the tallest, and quite often the average appropriate height left will be a fair amount more than the stop grazing height because nobody discussed this concept with the grazing livestock. The stop grazing height for most cool-season tall forages such as orchardgrass and tall fescue is about four inches. This amount is enough to maintain good soil cover and root support, but more importantly to maintain a decent solar panel for energy. When the forage is this height or higher, rotate to the next allotment. Keep doing this until the first paddock or allocation is ready to be grazed again. Stop where you are and go back to that first grazed area to help keep the forage under control. Skipped areas can be clipped, hayed, or stockpiled for later.

Some prefer to graze the allocation down closely before moving on. This method requires a lot longer recovery period for the forages and often also reduces overall productivity for the season.

Remember, it is not about maximizing a grazing event, but maximizing a grazing season! Keep an eye on the forages and keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

“Purdue Forage Field Guide” is a great resource.

<https://www.edustore.purdue.edu/item.asp?Item Number=ID-31>

For a Free Sample Copy of The Stockman Grass Farmer call 1-800-748-9808 or visit www.stockmangrassfarmer.com

Indiana Forage Council upcoming events: [Upcoming Events – Indiana Forage Council](#)

Please send comments or questions to grazingbites@gmail.com.

