

Grazing Bites

November 2013

Victor Shelton, NRCS State Agronomist/Grazing Specialist



I recently had my first hard freeze confirming that fall weather is really here and winter is coming. Typically, even our cool season grasses start really slowing down now and complete moving carbohydrates towards root reserves and the above ground portions go dormant. It is at this point where we can normally feel reasonably safe to start grazing stockpiled forages without worrying about stressing the plant too much. I would prefer to wait until there have been several nights in a row in the mid-twenties. I say this with the assumption that you have also finished up grazing any corn residue that might be available; if not, keep grazing as long as conditions permit, then move to the stockpiled forage. Every extra grazing day added is good!

We need to first look at what we have stockpiled. Forages that don't hold value very well and for very long need to be grazed first, such as orchardgrass, timothy hay aftermath, or perennial ryegrass, and even smooth brome once it has for sure gone dormant should be first on the list. I would move then to the last grazing of the year on Italian ryegrasses and continue with annual small grains as long as soil conditions permit.

If you have any fall seeded brassicas, now is a good time to start grazing on those. Most brassicas are very high in water and nutrients and most likely are going to need a little dry matter, such as hay or dry stockpiled forage added to keep a good balance. As I've said before, don't stand too close behind them if you are grazing turnips by themselves...or you'll see quickly what I'm talking about; just not a good idea to graze these brassicas as a monoculture.

If you are thinking about grazing any alfalfa hay aftermath, it is important to allow the plants to go completely dormant before grazing...this is usually in the same timeline as the first hard freeze. Graze then before leaf drop. Do not graze under wet conditions to prevent crown damage and ideally leaving a minimum of 3 to 4 inches of stubble for winter protection.

The mainstay and dominating stockpiled forage for the rest of the winter here in the Midwest is most certainly tall fescue. Whether old Kentucky 31 or an endophyte-friendly tall fescue like Max-Q, (if it is dominantly new fall regrowth with adequate nitrogen from either applied nitrogen or from associated legumes), it will hold its nutritional value better than anything as long as it lasts. I believe the worst stockpiled tall fescue that I have ever tested was just before new growth in early March and it was still about 11% crude protein with a digestibility of almost 60%... still better than lots of hay being fed. This is of course best utilized in strips; starting on the watering tank end of the field and working across, moving the fence forward as you go, ideally providing only 1-3 days of grazing at a time. You have to consider it standing "hay," and the more the cattle have access to at one time, the more they will waste; the smaller the allocation, the higher the efficiency. Accumulation in the early fall should have started 60 to 90 days before the end of the growing season—usually August-September in most parts of Indiana. Grazing stockpiled forages on some soils can be challenging. If you are on poorly drained soils or soils with fragipans, you may need to wait until the soil is frozen before grazing or graze early before they get saturated.

Pastures that could use more legumes can be grazed down extra tight at this point, opening up the canopy for frost seeding later on and also reducing competition for the new legume seedlings in the spring. Extra thick monocultures of grass probably need to be grazed a little harder prior to going dormant in the fall to really set them back in the spring if that is your intent. Ideally though, try and still leave three to four inches of forage behind for winter cover which helps reduce runoff, increase infiltration, and provide some dry forage with new grass next spring. If it going to be the first field grazed next spring, try to leave as much as possible or skip it completely until spring. This creates a great combination to start grazing next spring – dry forage mixed with very fresh new growth.



Water is still needed during winter months, and still needs to be adequate in quality and quantity. Now is a good time to make sure everything is working and ready. Most livestock prefer water between the temperatures of 37 and 65 degrees Fahrenheit. When the water temperature deviates very much beyond this range intake is reduced. All-weather tanks such as “ball” tanks or heated tanks are great for extending the grazing season out in the field and for winter feeding areas. Spring developments also make really great winter watering systems because water is constantly flowing through them keeping them open and fresh.

Just around the corner in early 2014, Indiana’s two grazing conferences will be going strong again. Both conferences will have outstanding speakers and I would strongly encourage you to attend either or both. Normally you would have to travel a long ways to hear some of these speakers and with a lot more expense. Each conference has its own agenda with different speakers so there will be little duplication. The Heart of America Grazing Conference is back in Indiana in January and is also sure to have a good lineup of speakers. Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities!

Heart of America Grazing Conference – January 20-21, 2014, Columbus, IN

Southern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 5th, 2014, Odon, IN – Jim Gerrish and Kathy Voth are main speakers. For more information contact the Daviess County Soil and Water Conservation office at 812-254-4780, Extension 3, email Toni Allison at dcswcd@rtccom.net, or visit their website at http://daviesscoswcd.org/main/page_sigc.html.

Northern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 7-8, 2014 - Michiana Event Center, Howe, IN. For more information contact the LaGrange County Soil and Water Conservation office at 260-463-3471, Extension 3 or visit their website at <http://www.lagrangeswcd.org>.

As of September 7 2013, the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI) is now the National Grazing Lands Coalition.