

Grazing Bites



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I've mentioned before that I'm often lacking one of three things - time, energy or money. Some days, I believe it is all three. I've had a very challenging year multiple ways but have been lucky to have had timely and sufficient soil moisture for most of the season and that, in itself, creates opportunities. That said, I apologize for the blessings that others did not receive.

I regret now not measuring growth over the season. It just didn't happen. I know yield wise; it was a phenomenal year. Regrowth after grazing events was quicker than normal and keeping up with the forage was almost impossible at times. I have two paddocks that were grazed so fast that you would never know that they were grazed by looking at them. They continued to be skipped over the season because it was hard enough keeping everything else in check.



Stockpiled tall fescue – standing green money.

Those skipped paddocks will make good, stockpiled forage along with fields that also have enough regrowth to graze again. We've also been blessed this fall with extraordinary mild weather for the season – well, up until recently. My first major frost in 2020 was October 16. It is late October as I write this and so far, I have not had a frost of any significance yet, but I know it's coming soon.

What is the real difference between a frost and a freeze? When water vapor condenses and freezes without first becoming dew, a thin layer of ice crystals form – this is frost. It generally has to be below 36 degrees to frost and include clear skies, moisture present and little wind. Plant tissue can be impacted, but not as severely as a freeze.

When the surface air temperature falls to 32 degrees or below, you have a freeze. Generally, if it is above 29 degrees, it is a light freeze that can kill most tender plants. If it is below 28 degrees, then it is considered a killing freeze or hard freeze – this freeze kills annuals and initiates shutdown of hardy perennials. After three hard freezes, most winter hardy perennial forages are dormant.

Forages going dormant is significant. USDA-NRCS defines stockpiling as 'allowing standing forage to accumulate for grazing at a later period, often for fall and winter grazing after dormancy.' The key word here is dormancy.

Once dormant, they can be grazed with less harm to energy reserves. Forage plants are sensitive to grazing in the fall. That is why I usually promote the use of annuals or crop residue, or ideally the combination of the two in the early fall. It allows the pastures to recuperate and build reserves.

If you don't have annuals or crop residues to graze, then you always have the option of feeding hay for a while and then going back to grazing. Yes – that sounds a bit crazy. Why would I feed hay when I still have grass that could be grazed? Two reasons. Number one, you don't want to hurt plant reserves impacting the stand for next year's growth. Number two, you can potentially gain a lot more growth if moisture and fertility is in check with the increasing green solar panel.

There are times or situations when grazing prior to dormancy or a killing freeze is what is needed. If you want to suppress spring growth, then grazing hard prior to dormancy can be beneficial. If you are frost-seeding clover into the field later this winter, this suppression of the grasses in the spring provides a longer window for the clover to grow and become established due to reducing the competition of the existing perennial grasses. I've also found fields that have become dominantly grass, especially a monoculture of tall fescue, can be grazed hard prior to

early fall pre-dormancy and, if a good seed bank is present, you can have increased diversity – more clover the following year.

Utilize less freeze tolerant forages first. Orchardgrass loses value fairly quickly after several heavy frosts and literally falls apart after several hard freezes. Tall fescues hold their value a long time and are the easiest and most ideal for long term stockpiling so save them for last.

With frosts and freezing conditions, we do need to remember that some warm-season forages such as sudangrass and sorghum-Sudan hybrids, and johnsongrass produce a cyanide compound when frosted, causing the production of the prussic acid. Once these forages are frosted, livestock should be removed for at least two weeks to allow for the forages to “dry down” and the prussic acid to dissipate before grazing again. Frosted areas could start with only “pockets” in a field. Any regrowth from the base of the plant after a frost can also be very high in prussic acid. It is just safer to avoid until forages are brown and dry – if in doubt, test before grazing.

I highly recommend strip grazing the stockpiled forage once you start grazing it. If you have three sets of reels with poly-wire on them, enough step-in posts and connectors, you are in business. You generally want three sets. One set for that first break wire. The second set is for a back fence if needed. The third set is for the next day’s move and it’s always better to have that set up ahead of time. There is nothing like a group of impatient hungry cows complaining that you aren’t setting up that new fence fast enough. If you already have it set up and just need to open it up to them then they won’t care how long it takes you to move it for the next day. If you don’t believe me, ask the cows. We’ll try and discuss allocating that forage out next month.

If you do not have portable water, then they may have to walk over where they have been to get it. If this is the case, start on the water end of the paddock and be watchful of excessive trailing. Trailing will occur when the same path is used over and over and may disturb or destroy forages in the path and open the area up to erosion. When it is a problem, consider adding new water points in the future and reseed any disturbed areas.

Even after the forages become dormant, it is still better to not graze them too close. A little residual is always good. It certainly helps to slow runoff, increase infiltration of water, and it does speed up spring regrowth. Ideally, there should be at least two to three inches of residual left. Opening the gates and letting the cows roam freely all winter may make the cows feel adventurous and free but can hurt forage yields in the long run.

I challenge everyone to extend the time frame that they are grazing. It is certainly possible to graze a very long time and reduce the amount of fed feed needed. Livestock numbers have to be in balance with your forage base to do so. That forage base can include corn residue, fall or winter hardy annuals, and hay aftermath once dormant. Grazing is generally cheaper than most anything that you might feed; most nutrients are returned back to the soil where they were removed; and there is usually less mud to deal with over winter.

Things eventually change over time. The format of Grazing Bites will change a little starting in December. It will be mailed from two different email addresses. **For most, it will come from grazingbites@gmail.com which you may respond to. Add that email address to your authorized addresses. If you do not receive the December issue next month, please email me.**

Remember, it’s not about maximizing a grazing event, but maximizing a grazing season! Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

National Grazing Conference – December 6-9, 2021, Myrtle Beach, SC. For more information go to: <https://www.grazinglands.org/grazing-conference/>



More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/in/technical/landuse/pasture/>

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Issue 166