Grazing Bites

May 2022

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It has been a few years since I mentioned one of my uncle's usual spring declarations. He used to talk about grass being in head by May 5, and he usually was correct. It probably will be pushing it to get there this year. Forages have been nipped a bit by cold spells, but certainly moisture is not lacking in this part of the country. Some areas could possibly have some reduced yield in spots because of freezing of new growth, but I don't see that as too much of an issue and in fact, for quite a bit of the state forage growth is in full swing.

Cereal rye can be some great early spring forage!

The northern part of the state appears to be still waiting for spring to fully appear. Wet and cold conditions have kept them from doing much grazing on new growth.

I am pleased so far by the forage stands and their early growth. Most producers have already started grazing. I know of several producers who are still grazing or just started grazing fall planted annuals. Their main hesitation was wet soils. If you are grazing fall annuals, especially cereal rye, then you know that once it really starts taking off, the livestock can barely keep up with it. That is a good thing!

For most people, hay supplies are either limited or gone by now and there is no more waiting … you just have to graze. So, the rules of thumb for these conditions: First, start or continue grazing the fields or paddocks with the most growth present, ideally with a fair amount left over from last year if that is possible. The heavier amount of material will help to protect the soil and provide some "cushion" to slow down pugging if wet.

Second, keep the animals moving. If they are in any one area for any extended period under saturated conditions, they will do more damage. If paddocks are fairly good sized, then leave them long enough to just top the growth and then move them to the next area. This actually will serve more than one purpose; the topping will hamper seed head development slightly right now (more deferment as the plant matures) and it is allowing the plant to maintain that solar panel and keep producing roots and leaf which will help give structure to the site and it will help maintain quality. It will also help stage the paddocks for future grazing.

Third, keep grazing new paddocks until the first paddocks grazed have re-grown back to a desirable height (for most cool-season tall grass combinations 8-10 inches) and then start back on them. With all that said, that is assuming that you have enough paddocks that each of these areas will have ample time to rest and recover prior to being grazed again.

By the second round of grazing or before, you will want to start really slowing down the rotation and making sure to graze each allotment more evenly. That doesn't mean even and level with the ground. It means to the appropriate stop grazing height. The stop grazing height will be three to four inches for most cool season forages, e.g., tall fescue and orchardgrass. The ideal stop grazing height for perennial warm season forages is 6-12 inches; those include switchgrass, big bluestem and Indiangrass.

Please remember, the stop grazing height is the shortest forage left standing, not the tallest. You can quickly and easily assess each paddock or allotment with a yardstick or with time, a point on your boot.

Allowing the plant to recover as much as possible prior to being grazed again will not only boost forage yield above ground, but also root growth below ground.

Not applying too much fertilizer, especially nitrogen, in the early spring will help keep this furious growth under a little more control. I really don't think that is going to be much of a problem this year with the price of nitrogen. This will be the year to hopefully have a very good stand of nitrogen producing legumes present – which is always pretty much true.

I don't see any hay making weather in the near future, but I would be hesitant to graze fields that will be cut for hay that are extremely wet until they dried up enough that they are less likely to pug.

I would take the fields that are the hardest to hay/mow and graze them in the early rotated half and leave the better fields for haying/mowing if that was my plan. If I did not plan on doing any hay or clipping, then I would think more about which fields really need more rest this spring. Rest is good. Just remember – more green growth, more solar panel, more roots, and more production equals more grazing.

Hay could potentially be of higher value this year. Not particularly because of supply and demand per se, but because of increase cost of inputs. You will want to graze as much and as long as you can this year and reduce the amount of hay requirements. Hay certainly is not free or even cheap, especially when you take into account just two things – fuel and nutrients.

Areas where you fed hay this winter and early spring are probably by now a muddy mess. With discarded and uneaten hay, manure and just mud, these areas will take a while to dry out enough to do anything with. Once they do, rotten hay and manure can be pushed up in piles to compost and later spread on fields for some added fertility and organic matter. The feeding area if left will turn into a "healthy" stand of weeds usually including some of our favorites such as prickly pig weed, lambs-quarter, crabgrass and an assortment of other opportunists that like high phosphorus and organic matter. These areas can often be worked slightly and sown to sorghum-sudangrass, sudangrass, or millets for summer grazing and for a little cover. I've also seen brassicas sown into these areas with success, but I'd still mix them with some annual grass such as the ones mentioned above.

It is probably a wise decision to continue feeding a mineral mix with sufficient magnesium for a while until we get past the early fast flush of new grass growth. When we have cooler temperatures and lush forage in front of the cows, a high-magnesium mineral supplement should be used. High-magnesium mineral mixes usually have about 16.5% magnesium.

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

Reminders & Opportunities

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

Fencing school at SIPAC on June 18. 1 PM to 5:30PM – More information coming - Flyer will be posted on SIPAC website. https://ag.purdue.edu/arge/pac/Pages/sipac-home.aspx

Purdue Forage Management Day will be September 1 at the Feldun-Purdue Agricultural Center, Bedford. https://ag.purdue.edu/agry/dtc/Pages/Calendar.aspx

Grazing Bites has changed. Please send comments or questions to grazingbites@gmail.com.

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