

Grazing Bites

December 2018

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I'm not really sure where this year went. At least for me, it seems like it should still be October, but the weather outside indicates a different message. Grazing activity for a lot of producers starts slowing down this time of year. If you are still grazing, and I hope you are, then you are probably grazing stockpiled forage, fall-planted annuals, or crop residue or a combination of all three.

I would encourage everyone to manage this forage efficiently. Allocating it out in smaller allotments is certainly worth pursuing. The smaller the portion allocated; the shorter the grazing period, and the higher the efficiency. You want this feed to last as long as practical and still meet the livestock needs. At this point, you are basically "feeding" standing hay but with some exceptions – no tractor, mower, rake or baler required, and the waste products are automatically redistributed back to the place of origin where they will do the most good. Now, it does take a little effort. The temporary fence does not get rolled up and or moved by itself, nor the temporary fence posts. A nice walk, a little exercise in cooler weather, while observing the animals grazing, is not a chore - no matter how hard you try to make it one. You should be checking them anyway and you don't even have to start up a tractor to feed them.



Cows happy grazing stockpiled forage. (Chris Hollen photo)

In today's world, we are inundated daily with disruptions, smart phone alerts, and just life in general. I look forward to that quiet time in the field. Even though I like to take pictures with my phone, it's nice sometimes to just leave it at the house and just enjoy the activity at hand. Without potential distractions, you pay more attention to the forage available, noticing what the livestock are eating and in what order, and once the move is complete and the bellowing of a few cows is over, you can listen to the melodious tearing and munching of forage. Some quiet time is worth the effort and you might find that you linger a little longer before the next task.

Stockpiled forage should be dormant now and you could probably take it down a little bit closer than our normal growing season "stop grazing" heights, but do you really want to? It's better to maintain good cover and maximize rainfall infiltration. You can accomplish this by just leaving adequate stubble behind after the last grazing that will slow runoff and help that rainwater stay on site.

Pastures with increasing organic matter result in soils being able to infiltrate more water. The biggest increase in soil organic matter comes from the turnover of new roots. The more deeper roots produced, the greater the opportunity to increase organic matter. Roots are somewhat proportional to above ground growth. If you always maintain very closely grazed forages, you will have shallow root systems. Shallow root systems have less turnover of roots and less potential for increasing or impacting organic matter. If you let forages fully express themselves in the vegetative stage prior to being grazed, utilize adequate stop-grazing heights, and remove livestock so the plant can recover and regrow before being grazed again, you are increasing the number of roots on those forages, and also increasing the potential for increasing soil organic matter.

The more organic matter your soil(s) contain, the higher the water holding capacity. Organic carbon can hold up to eight times its weight in water; this is a good thing! Organic matter is kind of the ultimate contingency plan. With some of the crazy weather extremes we have been having, you want the soil and the forages that grow on them to be as resilient as possible. This is not saturated soil, it's soil with the ability to store more water, but with sufficient

air available to maintain good structure. The ability to store water efficiently has benefits during both wet and dry conditions.

Improving organic matter, since I've already gone down this rabbit hole, is critical to maximizing biological activity, increasing nutrient holding capacity by providing more cation exchange sites, and for improved nutrient cycling and less leaching. Microorganisms, that use organic matter as a food source, appear to make micronutrients more available and along with organic matter help buffer the soil. There are other advantages, such as improved root environment due to available moisture and cooler soils which are beneficial to cool season forages.

I mentioned earlier about bellowing cows. It's important to make sure that you are providing enough forage for the timeframe that the livestock will be in that allotment. If you didn't leave them enough, believe me, they will tell you all about it. This time of year, I don't worry too much about back fencing as the cows move across a field, especially if enough residual is left behind. I do strongly recommend though that you maintain two temporary fences. The first fence provides them with the present allotment. The second fence is set up ahead of time for the next move. If animal numbers and forage is consistent, you can sometimes set up several fences ahead in advance. I do this quite often if I have a few extra spare minutes or it's an exceptionally good day to do it.

You really want that next fence already built and that next allotment ready for the cows the minute you get there to move them. They know why you are there and only you stand between them and some fresh forage. If they have to wait for you to put up that next fence before moving them, they will tell you all about it! Quite often there is some decent forage remaining after the grazing above and beyond what is needed for maintenance residual. You could force the cows to eat it, but they won't be happy about it and I'd rather have a little extra protection left behind in case the weather turns wet and to protect any travel areas to water or mineral. The cows at this point are more interested in something new fresh—think ice cream—and anything still there is more like eating broccoli.

I'll end this issue by wishing you and your family a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

- **2019 American Forage and Grazing Council Annual Conference and 75th Anniversary** — January 6-9, 2019, St. Louis, MO, Hyatt Regency at the Arch. Conference theme is “Forages Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow.” For more information: <https://www.afgc.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageID=3352>
- **2019 Heart of America Grazing Conference** — January 22-23, 2019, Ferdinand Community Center, Ferdinand, Indiana. For more information: <https://indianaforage.org/upcoming-events/heart-of-america-grazing-conference/> or email Jason Tower at towerj@purdue.edu
- **Northern Indiana Grazing Conference (NIGC)** – February 1-2, 2019, Michiana Event Center (new location) 4405 E Farver St., Shipshewana, IN. For more information about the NIGC or to get a registration form, please call the LaGrange County Soil & Water Conservation District office at 260-463-3471 extension 3.
- **Southern Indiana Grazing Conference (SIGC)** – March 6, 2019, Crane, IN – Speakers include Greg Judy, Darby Simpson, and Peter Allen. For more information contact the Daviess County Soil and Water Conservation office at 812-254-4780, Ext 3, email Toni Allison dc.swcd@daviess.org or visit <http://www.daviesscoswcd.org/index.php/sigc> or <https://www.facebook.com/SouthernIndianaGrazingConference>
- More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/in/technical/landuse/pasture/>



Greg Judy is back!