Grazing Bites

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Winter is setting in. The impact of the dry spell in late summer and early fall is now more evident as stockpiled forages that normally would have lasted a bit longer start running short. I've walked most of my pastures to do a quick assessment. Hay will come early this year.

They might make good pies, but blackberries in a pasture can reduce grazeable acres.

That "walkabout" helped me assess a few areas that could use a little attention besides estimating any remaining forage. A couple blackberry patches in one field certainly got my attention. Long, wet springs seem to be to their liking. I will certainly have to put a bit more pressure on them this coming year and probably clip or spray early to get them under control. Small patches where they were denser created too much competition for sunlight and water for the underlying forages and they were set back. When the canopy of perennial or annual weeds start exceeding more than thirty percent, you will have reduced forage growth and I also believe reduced nutritional value to some degree.

When it comes to briars, grazing intake is also going to be reduced and can you blame them? Who would want to have to try and eat around those thorns? It's bad enough just trying to pick a few berries from them during the summer for a pie!

I have successfully grazed/browsed them out a few times, but you must catch them early when they are immature and there has to be a lot of forage around them to entice the consumption and provide competition for any regrowth. Even then, it's best paired up with an early clipping and some spraying. It seems a bit odd talking about blackberries in January, but it's never too early to start planning out a strategy.

I will plan to skip these patches the best I can if I frost-seed any clover in the next month or so. Why? Because if I end up having to spray these patches, most legumes, especially seedling legumes, will not survive that endeavor. If there are not satisfactory perennial grasses left, which should be a minimum of at least six plants per square foot normally, then I may drill in more seed. You want good seed-to-soil contact, especially for larger grass seed.

I've also taken the more conservative route and just fed or unrolled some hay on the site and let the cows tread the seeds in some. This takes a bit of thought and care. You certainly don't want to try and do this under extremely wet or muddy conditions because we don't want to bury the seed. You also don't want to leave too much unconsumed material behind, or it can hamper growth come spring. The hay needs to be good enough quality that they want to consume most of it, but also mature enough that it might contain some viable and, ideally, desirable grass seed also.

The short residence of livestock on these sites while consuming and digesting as well as the redistribution of such material not only helps to "plant" seed, but it also adds nutrients, organic matter and food for bacteria, fungi and other organisms in the soil. All are valuable to restoring the site. Either way, you will still need to make sure to repeatedly reassess the site throughout the upcoming year or two for secondary maintenance.

Clipping or mowing to reduce bramble growth and reduce competition should be done as early as possible to get a jump on it and enable you to keep the canopy in check. If time allows and patches are small, spot spraying when plants are young in the spring followed later by a clipping can really set them back. If you have kept the

briars at bay for most of the summer by mowing, then a fall herbicide application with sufficient regrowth can be very controlling. If you have passed them by and let them create a spiny jungle, then you might be better off mowing them close and starting over the next spring. Contact your local extension office or chemical dealer for the appropriate herbicides and rates.

Enough on briars. Let's go back to frost seeding legumes. Frost seeding is certainly one of the least expensive ways to enhance the stand of legumes in your pastures. It is basically the process of broadcasting the legume seed onto the soil surface during the winter dormant months. For the most part, I usually say the ideal time is somewhere between Christmas and Valentine's Day. If I really had my choosing, I'd wait until there is a light snow on the ground and then do the sowing. The snow serves two good purposes. One, it helps "catch" the seed and transport it to the ground and two, it serves as a great marker for the tractor or ATV.

Frost seeding relies on the freezing-thawing action of the soil, which is honeycombing the soil surface with ice crystals. This causes the soil surface to expand and contract, allowing the small seed to find a route into the ground. During warmer winters, you might not always get enough action and if you don't get good seed-to-soil contact and the seed does not get covered; then it is less likely to survive. I doubt that will be the problem this year. Too often, when left lying on the soil surface, the sun can warm the ground and seed enough to initiate germination. It has little chance of surviving if this happens before the occurrence of another killing freeze. The seed that is protected by the soil will not be as likely to be impacted by the sun and is more likely to wait until the proper time period to germinate.

Competition is probably your next worst enemy. Now, I would hope that most would not consider broadcast seeding or frost seeding into a heavy stand of grass, but I have seen it done, usually with less success. If you know you are going to be frost seeding legumes into a pasture then I would recommend waiting until after the forage has become dormant and then graze it down to about 3-4 inches to remove any excess growth (not a problem now) to allow the seed to find its way to the soil surface and wait for that freezing action. Grazing closer to the soil surface also helps to depress early spring growth of the grass which will give the legume seedling a fighting chance. Now that reminds me to mention, don't hit those newly seeded fields with nitrogen in the spring either. All this does is to promote the grass growth in the sward and reduce those new legume seedlings' chances. They won't have the root base or energy stored up to compete with established grass, especially with a boost of nitrogen!

In closing today, you get three things usually for nothing: air, sunlight and water. Pretty much everything else you will pay for one way or another. All three are needed to grow forage. Maximize forage production, be as efficient as possible in grazing and maintaining it, and it will have a positive impact on your bottom line.

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

Reminders & Opportunities

AFGC - The virtual event will be held January 11, 2021 - January 12, 2021. For more details go to https://www.afgc.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3459 Reduced price for virtual.
Southern Indiana Grazing Conference – In-person canceled. Virtual is still being considered.
Northern Indiana Grazing Conference – Canceled for 2021.
Heart of America Grazing Conference – Postponed until August. Details to be announced later.
Virtual Winter Forage Conference – January 18-22, 2021 – Evenings except for Friday. This is based out of Virginia, but applicable for most of the Midwest also. For more information go to https://vaforages.org/2021-virtual-winter-forage-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/