

Grazing Management is Important – Especially During Summer

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It doesn't take long reading through cattle or forage magazines to come across an article that talks about the benefits of some type of rotational grazing. It might be called mob grazing, managed intensive grazing, or rotational stocking. The other day I read about a technique called "adaptive paddock grazing". All of these titles refer to the same basic principle – grazing forage and then removing livestock to give the forage time to regrow and replace energy reserves. There are various schools of thought about the number of cattle per acre that are needed, the length of time the paddocks should be grazed, and the amount of rest each paddock should get. But the point is to use a rotation to allow a producer to better utilize the forage in a pasture without overgrazing.

Overgrazing can be damaging to pastures, with the possibility of severely thinning a stand of grass. Anytime a grass is continuously grazed too short, the carbohydrates stored in the roots and crown of the plant are depleted. This can result in the death of many of the plants. Allowing the plants to regrow leaf and replace some of the carbohydrates will keep the plants vigorous and better able to regrow.

This principle holds true for any time of the year a plant is trying to grow. There are differences between forage species in their sensitivity to overgrazing, but if grazed hard enough, any species will thin out. The stress of overgrazing can be a problem any time of the year. But overgrazing during the summer can double the amount of stress. High temperatures and the lack of moisture are enough stress by themselves to cause stand loss. But if you couple that with overgrazing, serious stand loss can occur.

What are the keys to reducing stand loss during the summer? First is to reduce pasture size with temporary fencing. This will allow for movement of cattle between pastures, and an opportunity for plant rest and regrowth.

Second, possibly plant a warm-season grass. Grasses such as bermudagrass, crabgrass, etc., are adapted to higher temperatures than cool-season grasses like tall fescue. They also require much less water to produce a ton of forage. These two characteristics make them good choices for summer grazing. It will provide high quality forage during summer, and allow tall fescue pastures to be rested until fall growth begins.

There is no magic technique to minimize the effect of drought on pastures. But allowing pastures and chance to rest and regrow will help reduce the stand loss that we often experience during the summer months.

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