Grazing Bites

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I'm glad that warmer weather is finally here – at least most days it is. What I really don't like this time of year is major rainstorms, mud and the increasingly finicky palates of some livestock. I would compare the last to a nice, delicious meal on the table for the family to eat while knowing there is fresh pie for dessert. The momentary stables that are fine most any day are suddenly just not good enough and the desire to skip to dessert is almost more than some can endure.

The more they graze, the less fed feed they need. Photo by Chris Hollen

For the ruminant there are some good reasons for this. They have the ability to get fairly quick biological feedback from what they are consuming. This allows them to seek what may have the highest energy or nutrient that they need. The cows even know "washy" grass usually only "appears" better than the hay and will balance their diet if needed.

It also can provide some feedback to items that might be harmful so they recognize that it shouldn't be consumed. This is particularly true when there are plenty of choices to be made on the pasture salad bar. Perhaps we humans have something to learn from this.

Smaller ruminants are better grazers or browsers than larger livestock. Sheep and goats cannot only select specific plants to eat, but also very specific plant parts. Larger livestock such as cattle and horses are not as selective and do tend to consume more variety per bite if presented and especially so if there is any competition for that bite. So, the more you concentrate livestock, especially cattle, the less selective they become, and the more undesirable plants are consumed.

Smaller ruminants out graze larger livestock quality wise. This has been shown in fecal analysis studies and also in fistulated animals. They consistently harvest the highest nutritional plant parts available.

I prefer for the allocation of forage to be grazed down fairly evenly during the grazing event. By doing so, intermediate and undesirable species are also consumed and are less likely to get a stronger foothold in the pasture and out compete the desirable species that we, or rather the livestock, like.

To get a fairly even grazing and yet not allow overgrazing, ideally, the grazing event should be very short, and the livestock moved before enough time has passed for there to be much regrowth to prevent grazing of that new growth. That new growth is needed to help restore the solar panel that was just removed and also the energy reserves of the plant. If they are grazing new regrowth since the last move, they have been there too long. In an ideal situation, where livestock is moved prior to starting to graze new regrowth and forage is allowed to rest and recover, the grazing event is generally never over three days with shorter periods being better. The smaller the ruminant livestock, the truer this is.

I still raise some sheep. I would much rather have the sheep out on stockpiled forages or annuals this time of year than waiting and feeding hay. As soon as the first blade of grass appears in the overwintering area, hay is no longer the choice feed, no matter how good it is. Cattle are a bit more patient as long as they are not provided too many minute samples of the upcoming morsels. Once they get a good taste of new growth, they also balk, but are also more content on sufficient hay.

If you haven't figured it out yet, there is an order in which hay should be or should have been fed. Hay leftover from the previous year(s) should be the first to be utilized going into winter or whenever you first need it. The last of the winter feeding should be the best hay. This is especially true if you are spring calving. Nothing will stir up ruminant uproars more than feeding the least quality stuff at the end of winter. They will quickly complain about being fed broccoli leftovers while waiting for the ice cream to get ready.

As we discussed last month, it is best to wait for the forages to have some substance before grazing begins. Preferably, you will wait to start grazing until the plants are at least 8 to 10 inches tall (tall cool-season forages such as fescues and orchardgrass) and sufficient growth that includes enough fiber for the livestock. The forage plant early in the spring is also pulling reserves from the roots and starting photosynthesis. Being consumed too early and immature slows the process and reduces resilience and long-term growth potential for the season. I'm counting the days.

Once you do transition to pasture for the season, it is still a good idea to have a little hay available for them to start with and ensure you make sure they have consumed some hay prior to the first gate opening. It will provide some stable fiber to help balance out new forage that is still lusher and often higher in water content than what they have been consuming. Generally, if they need it, they will eat it. Ruminant livestock have never failed to support that theory.

It is probably a wise decision to make sure you are feeding a mineral mix with sufficient magnesium. Normal rates for mineral mixes contain about 2% magnesium. 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. You should probably continue with this supplement until we get past the early fast flush of new grass growth. Fields that have been supplemented with extra nitrogen and potassium tend to have more issues because more magnesium can be tied up. It's a balancing of cations. Keeping sufficient salt and other minerals that are needed available all the time is always a good place to start and lowers concerns. Check with your local veterinarian or extension agent for more information.

It does seem we are having more rain and wetter springs than in the past or my patience grows thinner the older I get. Thankfully, the wind helps to dry things out between them some. New forage growth stabilizes the soil and builds increasing amounts of resilience with an abundance of new roots and additional cover mixed with last season's leftovers.

I dread the transition period from fed forages to pasture almost every year. That might sound a bit odd to say. I'm glad to have livestock grazing again, I just wish that there had been enough forage of some type available, perennial or annual, that grazing was more of a perpetual event than seasonal. That is the ultimate goal for some. For most, the goal is to just reduce the amount of winter feed needed as much as possible. Some hay or winter fodder is almost always needed, even in the most ultimate systems and purely for insurance purposes if nothing else. The weather can and has thrown some major curve balls.

Winter feed has always been a major cost of ruminant livestock production. The more it can be reduced, generally, the better it is on the bottom line. It takes more acres per animal unit to be able to graze more days per year. It generally takes both perennial and annual forages, but not always. The livestock is for the most part, going to be consuming the same amount of dry matter each year whether it is harvested by the livestock themselves or harvested by you or someone else and fed to it.

The amount of forage that is "fed" to the livestock is quite often just personal choice. The more hay made, the more hay that is fed. Could some of that fodder have been grazed in place or at least more of it? This season is going to have some challenges, especially with fuel prices. Reducing the turning of wheels should be a goal with a focus on growing more forage per acre and harvesting more of it directly with livestock instead of mechanically. 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/

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

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