Grazing Bites

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I hear quite often from people who have read a recent Grazing Bites. Two people recently have referred to the article as grazing "bits" not "bites," but I really don't care what you call it as long as you're reading it and hopefully getting something out of it. For future reference, though, most "bits" are nouns - the sharp point of a tool, a horse bridle, a small amount of something, a minute computer unit, an old monetary value or perhaps a past tense bite! "Bite" is a verb to cut, grip, or tear with or as if with the teeth – hence grazing forages with teeth. Perhaps though, grazing bites are also bits of grazing information.

Does the manure from stockpiled forage being grazed stand the test?

It didn't take too many windy and rainy days to shed the trees of any remaining leaves, provide us a surprise early snow and declare that winter was truly moving forward. My wife likes the changes of the seasons, but if it was up to me, I'd consider moving lock, stock, and barrel to a warmer spot for a short while every year. I've known a few people who did move some of their cattle southward during the winter so they could continue to graze – usually on winter annuals. There are some years that can also be accomplished here in the Midwest.

If you can get cereal rye planted early enough to get sufficient growth to graze, then grazing can begin in the fall once plants reach 6-12 inches tall and can be grazed to a height of 3-4 inches. That can't be done if it isn't planted until early November – the earlier the better. Mid to late August is really ideal to provide the most growth for grazing in the fall. Later seedings will only get started and will delay more growth until spring providing good cover for the field, but little or nothing to graze until spring.

For most people, if your livestock are still grazing at this point, you are probably either grazing stockpiled forage, perhaps some corn residue, left over fall annuals or grazing pastures that should have been exited a long time ago. I hope it is stockpiled forage.

Stockpiled forage is technically defined as standing forage allowed to accumulate for grazing at a later period, usually for fall and winter grazing after dormancy. Tall fescue makes some of the best stockpiled forage because it holds quality better and doesn't fall apart with freezing weather mainly due to a waxy layer on the leaves. I love orchardgrass, but it doesn't hold up very long at all after several hard freezes. If you have stockpiled orchardgrass, use it first. Quality stockpiled tall fescue quite often has better feed values than a lot of hay that is fed at the same time.

You may cuss tall fescue, especially old Kentucky 31 endophyte infected tall fescue during the growing season, but the KY 31, low endophyte varieties and endophyte friendly varieties all stockpile very well. The first thought from some might be - what about fescue toxicity from the KY 31 tall fescue? Research from the University of Missouri indicates that ergovaline and total ergot alkaloid levels decline significantly within 30 days when tall fescue is cut, dried, and baled for hay.

What about stockpiled KY 31 tall fescue then? When grazing fescue in the late fall or winter the threat of fescue toxicity is reduced. The reduction is probably a combination of time, similar to the hay, and freezing conditions. Most people think that ergovaline doesn't pose a problem in stockpiled fescue because ergovaline appears to concentrate in seed heads and stockpiled fescue is generally vegetative. Livestock eat stockpiled fescue better after a couple of hard frosts or freezing conditions. Most studies have found that ergovaline content drops fairly fast after mid-December. Sadly, as long as endophyte infected tall fescue is growing, it

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probably is still producing some ergovaline – another good reason to not start grazing stockpile until completely dormant.

I've tested a lot of stockpiled forage the last couple decades or so and tall fescue has rarely disappointed me. The stockpiled forage quite often is better quality than if the same forage had been harvested for hay – higher amounts of crude protein and total digestible nutrients.

Even in late February, stockpiled fescue is still holding value and not unusual at all to have a crude protein value still of 11% and digestibility of 58%. I certainly don't expect most people to test forages, especially during the winter. Knowing the value of the stockpile provides the information needed to know if supplemental feed is needed or not.

A very quick and easy way to get a little bit of information on the value of the stockpile without testing it is to look at the manure from the grazing livestock. Yes, look at the cow piles. I've received a few odd looks during a pasture walk when I intentionally took my boot across a manure pile to critique it.

Unless quite a bit of nitrogen has been added to the stockpiled forage, the crude protein value isn't going to be nearly as high as lush spring forage and creating a thinner more "splattable" manure patty. At best it is going to be more the consistency of pudding or pumpkin pie filling. My wife often complains when I make such a comparison to food – but people understand food type descriptions. The pudding-pumpkin pie filling is that nice smooth textured manure - yes, I've looked at way too much manure. This manure will have a crude protein range from 12-15% with digestibility in the 60's this time of year on stockpiled forage. At this stage, quality of the forages consumed is fairly well balanced and stays in the rumen long enough to allow good absorption of nutrients and thus decent performance.

True "piles" indicate then that forage quality is lower and probably more like in the range of 6-8% crude protein with moderate total digestible nutrients. This type of manure usually indicates a declining forage quality and is more maintenance quality at this point. Poor quality hay will do the same thing. The consistency of the manure is a rough indicator of crude protein and digestibility of the consumed forage. Low-quality forages take longer for ruminant animals to digest. They remain in the digestive tract for longer periods, and more moisture is removed prior to elimination of waste.

Low-quality forages generally contain more non-digestible fiber, but they're also usually low in protein. Providing supplemental protein to ruminants actually feeds the rumen microbes. Those rumen microbes are necessary for the cow to utilize forages efficiently. Addressing dietary protein needs can improve rumen fermentation, increase the rate of passage and boost forage consumption.

Actual forage analysis is the best way to know what level of various nutrients forage resources can provide but observing manure can provide a quick idea. Consult an animal nutritionist when needed to balance out nutritional shortfalls, especially for growing and lactating animals.

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

Reminders & Opportunities

Northern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 3-4, 2023 - Michiana Event Center, Shipshewana, IN – More information coming soon!

Heart of America Grazing Conference – February 20-21, 2023 – Ferdinand, IN - www.indianaforage.org

Southern Indiana Grazing Conference – March 29, 2023 – Shiloh Community Center, Odon, IN – More information coming soon!

Please send comments or questions to grazingbites@gmail.com.

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