Grazing Bites

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The two weeks in the middle of February either tested your patience with the weather and/or your winter contingency plan! I think I had personally gotten a bit too used to milder winter weather over the past few years and was more concerned about mud control and saturated soils than wintery monstrosities that started reminding me a bit of the winter of '78. In reality, it wasn't that bad, but the mixture of snow and ice in layers and extremely cold temperatures certainly tested your preparations.

In some areas, the green never totally disappeared this winter.

Even though there has been some bitter cold weather the past few weeks, when the snow melted away, you had to be a bit surprised to see so much green still present in your pasture and lawn! I've noticed the same thing with some cover crops. Even species that we usually expect to winter kill normally are still hanging in there such as oats and radishes. Snow may be frozen and cold to the touch, but it can still provide some good insulation for plants underneath it. Perhaps it makes the statement, "blanket of snow" that much more fitting.

The weather, as far as I know, can't be controlled. I honestly hope that nobody ever figures out how to manipulate the weather either. I wouldn't trust anyone with that kind of power. The slight differences from season to season are quite interesting to watch and it keeps us on our toes. Most years, we have enough cold weather, particularly multiple nights with temperatures below 25 degrees, that puts most forages into winter dormancy.

Forages going into winter dormancy is actually a good thing. It allows the plant to rest from above ground forage growth and not utilize much energy from stored reserves. Those reserves will be needed soon to initiate the first new spring growth. If those reserves are continuously tapped into— especially before dormancy sets in for the winter — then you usually have slower and reduced growth in the spring until photosynthesis has kicked in enough on new growth to replenish energy reserves, then above ground growth can catch up if allowed to.

My wife has noted remarkable growth on some daffodils and questioned me if that was there prior to the mid-February snow. I honestly don't know. I wasn't paying that close attention to them and instead paid more attention to getting animals attended to during the snowy bluster. But she was correct, they were remarkably not only up through the ground and approaching almost four inches, but a few buds were also present. They are simply reacting to the weather around them. This is not the first time for them to do this and it is certainly not always a good thing either because I have seen them frozen, flowers nodding, after a heavy freeze while in full flower.

The question of the day isn't about daffodils, though, but forages, especially cool season forages and exactly what are they doing right now? New spring growth is mostly influenced by day length and temperature.

In response to a comment or question, "Don't you think that the grass seems greener after the snow melted away and is it growing," certainly caught my attention and made me stop and think a bit. It might still feel rather cool to most people, but it doesn't take much warmth, especially in soil temperature, to initiate some growth for cool season grasses. Soil temperatures much above freezing, especially with some warm sunny days and increasing daylight, can entice new growth. Soil temperatures above 50 degrees really promotes growth. So, first, what is the soil temperature now? That will depend a lot on where you are, temperatures and how much sun your fields

are getting. A look at soil temperature of some bare ground on a late day of February early morning shows just a bit above freezing, but when taken midafternoon, it was approaching almost 40 degrees. It can't maintain that temperature with nights still dropping down, but that is normal!

The melting of snow can add minute amounts of nitrogen to the sward but is for the most part insignificant. If I had to guess, and it is a guess, I'd assume perhaps a scanty five pounds at best. Major swings in soil temperature do stimulate microbial activity in the soil and energy. We might not notice this difference on a soil thermometer, but the plants do.

Now, that said, just because we have some new growth coming on in the pastures does not mean to let the livestock have at it. We are a good way from that yet. Grazing too early in the spring does nothing but remove some of that solar panel the plants need to start rebuilding sugar and growing new roots. The forages really need to be able to canopy over and get a good start before livestock start removing that top canopy or production will be reduced. Besides, it is early still, and there are some scattered snow patches just hanging around enticing some more.

Most producers with pasture or hay ground understand the concept of "frost-seeding" clover. Frost seeding is taking advantage of the freeze-thaw process of the soil during winter months. When water in the soil freezes, it moves upward, pushing some soil with it. This creates little pockets for seeds to fall into, especially slick smooth seeds like clover. This process provides a good environment for seed-to-soil contact and good conditions for that seed to grow later. Soils that have had a little more disturbance and that have small amounts of soil visible are subject to more heaving due to the lack of enough cover and therefore the seed takes better, but these fields will also usually require more rest prior to grazing in the spring because of it. We will most likely still have frost-seeding conditions yet, so if needed, get'r done.

If you already have some clover and are just enhancing what you have, then utilize improved varieties for the best results. If you don't have any clover presently, then you should inoculate the seed with the appropriate rhizobium. The seed may germinate and thrive without it, but it will do so much better if it is present, especially if one of the goals for planting the legume is as a nitrogen source for the grass component of the stand. Clovers add diversity, boost yields, provides pollinator loving plants to the pasture and there are some benefits, especially with red clover, in reducing or diluting endophyte-infected tall fescue issues.

I mentioned "preparation" for wintery conditions at the beginning. Utilizing proper nutrition is a priority. We may not spend any longer than we have to with the livestock on those days, but they don't have much choice. Energy requirements are higher, so it's a good time to feed the higher quality feed. Have hay marked or organized and ideally backed with forage sampling ahead of time. Supplement as needed to meet nutritional and energy needs.

Having your feeding area easily assessable, for any weather condition, is certainly also very advantageous. Keeping hay/baleage close to the feeding area and having good infrastructure for storage and movement is very beneficial, especially when things get snowy, icy or just muddy. Heavy use area sites and access roads suddenly appear and are very beneficial and worthwhile. Having a series of bales set out, where all you have to move is poly wire and perhaps a ring is also a great way to get through these situations if you have good soil conditions, ideally being dry or frozen.

In closing, spring is coming and will be here before we know it. Management does impact spring regrowth, so wait on grazing unless you still have stockpiled forage so you can maximize production. Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

Purdue "Forage Friday Forum" - Friday noon ET from March 5 to April 16, individuals will discuss topics related to forage management for an hour. Flier Register at: https://bit.ly/2LlPnZK

More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/in/technical/landuse/pasture/