

Smooth Transition to Spring Pastures

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Spring arrived in the Upper Midwest with unusually cold and wet conditions. Under these circumstances, this checklist has several strategies that can ease the transition into spring and help you avoid common mistakes associated with transitioning too fast from dry, austere hay-feeding to lush green grass-grazing.

✓ **Provide dry hay for the first couple of weeks of spring green-up.** A smooth transition calls for continuation of hay feeding for a week or two into grass green-up. This strategy allows for gradual change from stored hay to pasture grazing. The rumen microbe population changes with the type of feed. During winter, this population is mainly high-fiber digesting microbes. In spring, new growth of grasses has very low 'effective fiber,' to which the microbes need to adjust. Also, this green-up is very high in crude protein. This combination of low 'effective fiber' and high protein is associated with spring diarrhea. Extending dry hay feeding helps ease the transition by balancing the rumen microbes until fully adjusted.



Signs of diarrhea due to lush spring pastures.

✓ **Take animals off pasture.** Delaying initial grazing or limiting the number of hours the animals have access to pasture each day allows for sufficient regrowth after winter dormancy. Utilize a stocking rate (animals/ac) that is not too high. Bunch grasses, like orchardgrass, will not tolerate high stocking, which leads to close grazing. Keeping animals on pasture while grass regrows will encourage grazing on the new growth because it will be tender and more palatable. Sod-type grasses like Kentucky bluegrass, smooth brome grass, or reed canarygrass will come back early; however, they too benefit from grazing time off. Grasses relying on the underground stems or rhizomes, like sod grasses, will use these structures as an energy reservoir to grow new leaves. Taking animals off pasture also allows for a strong root system. This plan will likely provide you with more grass later in spring.



Spring regrowth of pastures not long enough for grazing.

Consider early harvesting of excess forage growth before grasses are fully flowered or head out. If you opt to harvest the excess forage, the best time is immediately after grazing. This approach will help maintain the forage nutritive value of the grass and provides early harvesting of surplus grass.

✓ **Split nitrogen (N) and potassium (K) fertilizer applications.** There are several reasons for splitting N and K. Spring lush pastures with excess N and K tend to cause grass tetany or low blood magnesium. Soil testing results will indicate which deficiencies need to be addressed. Most N and K fertilizers are top-dressed in split applications. The purpose for dividing the N applications is to avoid excess levels in the soil that could lead to grass tetany. Split applications also help control leaching and volatilization losses, minimize effects of uneven fertilizer distribution, minimize risk of fertilizer burns, and guarantee N and K supply coincides with livestock forage needs.

✓ **Fast rotation of pastures.** Do a quick rotation of the livestock through your paddocks to capture initial grass growth, but mainly because your pasture might be too wet. A quick rotation will help avoid compaction by minimizing the hooves' action on the above-normal soil moisture.

✓ **Treat for internal parasites.** Internal parasites go hand-in-hand with grazing livestock. Prevention and management of parasites during spring is key to avoiding health problems for grazing livestock. High humidity allows for parasites to remain infectious in pastures for longer periods of time. Check with your veterinarian about the best preventive options.