

Early Season Management of Grass Pastures & Livestock

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Last summer's severe drought conditions left many grazing livestock producers in a precarious situation. Perennial pastures were often used up much earlier than normal and abused, to some degree, through late summer and early fall due to fall grazing shortages. Additionally, producers were very short of or entirely without any winter roughage. Although many were able to acquire roughage by buying crop residues, CRP stumpage, and/or road ditch hay, most of that came at a significant cost. Moving into spring, many are dealing with the significant shortage of roughage to help bridge grazing livestock through to grass turnout. Here are a few suggestions, warnings, and solutions to get you to spring grass.

Be careful of grazing too early. One often desires to get cattle out of muddy lots and onto grass at the first hint of green-up. This will be especially tempting this year due to the shortage of roughage and the inability to extend livestock feeding. Early grazing, however, is extremely hard on perennial pasture grasses. Studies have shown grazing perennial grasses before they have three full leaves (not including the top flag leaf) will reduce season-long yields 30-45% (Mousel, 2009; Sedivec, 1999). Early grazing before grasses have three full leaves under drought conditions can reduce season-long yields up to 70% (Mousel, 2012). You can actually put yourself in a worse position on the balance sheet by turning livestock out early.

Minimize damage with sacrifice areas. When there is nothing left to feed, something has to be done. I suggest trying to limit damage to a defined area that can later be regenerated through agronomic means. Even if sacrifice areas are not a normal component of your management system, one can easily be set up temporarily with some hotwire. If possible, pick an area that drains fairly well, has water access, offers wind protection, is accessible to catch calves and feed supplements, and you can get into it with a no-till drill or other tillage equipment. Make sure it is big enough for the number of livestock you're going to graze (~10-15 ac/50 pairs). If your area is too small, you'll just create a mudhole. Sacrifice areas will allow livestock to pick at available green grass while you are still feeding them but doesn't allow them to completely wreck a good pasture.

Spring interseeding. In some cases, sacrifice areas can be interseeded with a cheap forage crop such as oats (~1.5 bu/ac) or annual ryegrass (~15 lbs/ac) that germinates quickly. Seed can be no-tilled in, even if livestock are already turned out. Broadcast seeding also can be effective. However, it requires 30% more seed than no-tilling and there is a possibility you'll just end up feeding a lot of birds. The objective is to acquire an extra week or two of grazing before spring grass turnout.

Extending the grazing season. Consider extending the grazing season into the fall. Cereal grains, annual ryegrass, cover crops species, or summer annuals can all be used as forage crops. The objective is to add a few weeks of grazing, so even if a relatively small number of acres are available, choosing the right crop can easily generate the forage needed to achieve the objective. Every situation is different so consult with your agronomist or Extension Educator to figure out what forage species will best meet your goals.