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Not Enough to too Much...Managing Spring Grass

Extension Forage Specialist Dr. Chris D. Teutsch at the University of Kentucky Research and Education Center in Princeton wrote the following article about how to best utilize the abundance of forage growth expected over the next few weeks.

In March we often find ourselves wringing our hands waiting for grass growth to start and a short time later our pastures are out of control! Spring can often be one of the most difficult times for grazers. Grass growth goes from nonexistent to excessive in a matter of weeks. If you are properly stocked, grazing livestock can have a hard time keeping up with it. The following suggestions can help you to stay in control of spring growth.

Implement rotational grazing. To fully utilize the spring flush of pasture growth you must be in control of grazing. In a continuous grazing system, the cows are in charge. By utilizing rotational stocking, you start to make the decisions. Implementing a rotational stocking system may be as simple as closing some gates or stringing up some electric poly wire.

Start grazing before you think the pastures are ready. One of the most common mistakes that grazers make is waiting too long to start grazing. If you wait until the first paddock is ready to graze, by the time you reach the last paddock it will be out of control. Starting early allows

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you to establish a “grazing wedge”. The “grazing wedge” simply refers to having pasture subdivisions or fields at varying stages of regrowth from just grazed to ready to graze.

Rotate animals rapidly. It is important to realize that grazing pastures closely and repeatedly as they initiate growth in early spring can reduce production for the entire season. Therefore, it is important to keep animals moving rapidly through the system. The general rule is that if grass is growing rapidly then your rotation should be rapid. This will allow you to stay ahead of the grass by topping it off and keeping it in a vegetative state.

Avoid applying spring nitrogen when possible. Applying nitrogen in the spring will make the problem of too much grass at once even worse. In many cases, you are better off applying nitrogen in late summer or early fall to stimulate growth for winter stockpiling.

Remove most productive paddocks from rotation and harvest for hay. Graze all paddocks until the pasture growth is just about to get away from you and then remove those productive paddocks from your rotation and allow them to accumulate growth for hay harvest. In the spring during periods of rapid growth, some paddocks can be removed from the rotation and harvested for conserved forage. Cutting at the late boot or early head stage will optimize yield and forage quality.

Even out seasonal distribution of forage by adding a warm-season grass. Adding a well-adapted warm-season grass that produces most of its growth in July and August would allow you to concentrate grazing on your cool-season paddocks during periods of rapid growth. After cool-season grass growth is slowed by higher temperatures in late spring and early summer, animals can be shifted to the warm-season paddocks for summer grazing.

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Consider mowing out of control pastures. The benefits of clipping include maintaining pastures in a vegetative state, encouraging regrowth, and controlling weeds. Clipping pastures costs money, so make sure that the primary reason is pasture management, not appearance.

Stockpile out of control pastures for summer grazing. Although forage quality decreases as the plant matures, the quality of spring stockpiled pasture is sufficient for dry cows. In some cases can result in reasonable gains on growing animals during the summer months. This is especially true if using novel endophyte tall fescue and the pastures were clipped at the early boot stage to promote vegetive regrowth. This could be a cost-effective and simple way to provide additional grazing during the summer months.

When it comes to grazing operations, there is not one size that fits all. What works for you may not work for your neighbor. The key is figuring out what works on your farm and implementing it in a timely manner. Hopefully one or more of the above tips will help you deal with the “quandary of spring grass”!

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