

Pasture Management

With proper pasture management, you can have clean water, healthy animals and a vigorous pasture – all at a reasonable cost. But, healthy pastures don't just happen. Without some attention your pastures can quickly become a source of weeds, mud, manure and headaches for you, your animals and neighbors. Here are some tips to help you manage your pastures for healthy animals and environment.

Animal Density

For someone who is new to rural living, five acres may seem like unlimited space. Consequently many small acreage landowners put too many animals on too little pasture. Before acquiring animals, ask yourself, “Do I have enough space for these livestock?”



Pop Quiz: During a 6 month grazing season, how many acres of irrigated pasture does it take to provide the forage needs of one

a) horse b) cow c) sheep d) llama e) goat?

ANSWERS: a) 1/5 acre b) 1/3 acre c) 1/3 acre d) 1/3 acre e) 1/5 acre

Grazing

Grazing is your primary pasture management tool. Think of your pasture grasses as your crop and the animals as your method of harvesting. Matching the amount of grass with the amount eaten will reduce waste and prevent the need to grow or buy hay, which can increase your expenses. Understand that you may only have enough pasture to exercise your animals and will need to provide hay year-round.

Keep grasses in a vegetative state. Consider the bottom 2 to 3 inches of the plant as an “energy bank” which should be left for plant use, not animal feed. Overgrazing causes bare spots and encourages weeds, erosion and runoff of nutrients into nearby streams and wetlands.

Cross Fencing and Rotational Grazing: You can control how long animals are allowed to graze an area by dividing your large pasture into several smaller pastures. Left on their own to continuously graze, animals will eat their favorite grasses and leave less desirable species to thrive and go to seed. Rotational grazing is the practice of allowing livestock to start grazing in a pasture when the forage is 6-8 inches tall. After the forage is eaten to about 4 inches, livestock are removed and the plants are allowed to re-grow. These grazing heights optimize nutritional value for the animals as well as pasture plant health.

Good grazing management should increase the amount of forage per acre. It will reduce overgrazing and the need to buy feed from other sources. Livestock are healthier and will maintain weight on well-managed pastures.

Other Management Tools

Mow and Drag: Mowing the pasture simply cuts all of the plants to the same height. This prevents plants from getting too tough and from overshadowing each other. Dragging can be done with several devices such as chain link fence or an old bed spring. You drag this around the pasture to break up manure clods and spread them evenly throughout an area, making nutrients evenly available.

Reseeding: If you do reseed pastures, consider soil types and how you will be using the pastures. Choose an early maturing variety for a pasture that you can move animals onto in early spring. For a pasture that is too wet in spring, select a later maturing variety. This will help balance plant growth, animal needs and soil conditions.



Continuous grazing leads to patchy pastures, while pasture rotation can minimize overgrazing.

Compaction: Soil that is compacted restricts root growth and prevents water from moving through the soil to roots. Keep animals off pastures in wet winter months. If soil is already compacted, aerate the area in the spring or early summer when grasses are actively growing and fill in rapidly.

*Article written in cooperation with:
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