

# Grazing Bites

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I can't believe how much forage growth we have already had this year. It seems early, but it is only about ten or twelve percent ahead of last year now. I've already heard from a few people asking the best way to try and keep it under control. My wife, who is a bit vertically challenged, already thinks it is getting tall when she has to move or put up a new stretch of temporary fence. With warmer days and certainly no shortage of water, forages are growing fast and do appear out of control!

You will probably note, as you walk or drive your ATV around the fields, that there may be differences in growth. The reasons for those differences can vary but include irregularities in fertility, last autumn's stop grazing heights, soils, compaction, rest after grazing, and the forages themselves. I don't have time to cover all of those today, but will cover what I can.



*Seed heads are already forming on some grasses like this orchardgrass.*

One of the problems, with quick early growth, if you want to consider it a problem, is competition. If you have over seeded or frost-seeded legumes into the pasture, you need to somewhat keep their competition at bay. Those fields need to be grazed enough to keep existing forages, mainly grass, from competing too much with the legume seedlings for light. All of this can be accomplished by keeping the livestock moving and not staying in any paddock too long. If the paddock was grazed down tighter last fall, especially pre dormancy, then that will help.

If you don't like weeds, and I'm not especially fond of some of them, competition is really a good thing and an excellent tool to help control them. The more you keep the ground covered and maintain enough growth to help prevent new weeds from emerging, the more control you will have on them. Good healthy growth and cover is always a good thing, so maintain that cover and don't overgraze. Keep at least three to four inches of growth at all times on most cool-season forages; that's the shortest height you leave behind, not the tallest!

Most forages have already surpassed normal start grazing heights (six to eight inches for most tall cool-season forages such as fescues and orchardgrass). Having a good root base, which starts the previous fall, and maintaining adequate residual is important to protect the soil from excessive compaction, especially when you are having as much rain as some areas have been getting lately. More growth and more residual, means more resilience. Dang, I've already gotten off on a tangent.

Okay, getting back to controlling runaway grass! There is some advantage to grazing early as long as you use some "animal" control, especially in a rotated grazing system. Starting early and making sure to maintain minimum grazing heights for the forages is really the critical issue, but it also helps to keep the forages from getting too far ahead of you before you graze them again. Staging forages helps you keep more of the paddocks in better condition longer, with less need of haying or clipping. Those fields that had more rest and more leftover forage will be ready earlier, and the tighter grazed fields will be ready later.

I would still promote grazing for short periods, keeping the animals moving and never grazing closer than three to four inches whenever possible. If the forages start getting ahead of you, consider making the paddocks slightly larger and grazing the areas for shorter periods of time letting the animals top graze to help slow down seed head production some. The goal should be to maintain as much pasture as possible

in what I've referred to in the past as "stage two" growth; quality vegetative leafy growth prior to seed head production. This quality forage with good intake will ensure good growth on growing animals, milk for lactating animals, and also help to flatten the growth curve some, providing quality forages a little longer into the season.

Any fields that have to be "skipped" can be clipped for later use, cut for hay or baleage, or left as is for maintenance animals. You need to try and keep the paddocks as vegetative as possible for growing animals. If you wait too long to re-graze them you may get frustrated quickly in trying to play catch-up. It's better to skip one and deal with it later. Not applying too much fertilizer, especially nitrogen, in the early spring will help keep this furious growth under a little more control.



*Maintain stop grazing heights!*

Let's talk about those three options a little more. First, the forage could be clipped at early seed head and as high as needed to help maintain quality a little longer. This also satisfies those who don't like to deal with seed heads and certainly is aesthetically pleasing.

Second, they could also be mown for hay. Most producers do need some hay and certainly mowing it earlier rather than later means higher quality forage and probably more potential for increased regrowth. Producing high quality hay depends upon cutting the forage plant at a vegetative stage and then getting enough dry sunny days to allow the plants to dry. The frequent rains we have been receiving is good for forage growth, but they also hinder quality hay production. Too much hay is cut at full bloom or a mature stage of development. As any grass or legume plant matures, quality declines in terms of crude protein, energy and digestibility. Hay harvest also removes nutrients that will need to be replaced.

Third, those fields could also be left standing and allowed to mature, creating a good carbon base. Then, as needed, they can be strip grazed with maintenance animals, such as dry cows allowing them to graze the best and leave the rest. If grazed with high density for short periods, they will lay unconsumed forages on the ground which will help in the long run to improve soil health by feeding the microbes, and increasing diversity.

Quite often there is no set ideal grazing pattern or set timeframe in trying to maintain quality forages. It is instead rather more of a game with changing rules, tactics, and plays to try and overcome the challenges of the season. Every year is different. We need to be prepared with more than one tool in the toolbox. When forages are growing fast, rotate fast. When forages are growing slower, graze slower. Maintain as much as possible in vegetative form and deal with the excess wisely.

Keep on grazing!

## **Reminders & Opportunities**

**Grazing 102** – June 23-24, 2017, Dubois, IN, more information later.

**Indiana Forage Tours** – Late July 2017 - Sites TBD in Southern Indiana, more information later.

**Grazing for the Future Conference** – August 17-18, 2017, Madison, Indiana. Registration Link: <https://grazing-conference.eventbrite.com>

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