

Spring Grazing Management: When Should I Turn Out the Cows?

By Tom Gervais, USDA-NRCS Grazing Specialist

Even during a relatively mild winter like the one we've been having it can be really tempting to turn your livestock onto pasture as soon as the snow melts and you start to see a little green. Most beef cattle (or other livestock) have been on stored forages since sometime last fall, and operators of early spring calving herds usually want to get the calves off the calving area and onto a nice clean pasture as soon as possible.

Luckily, in many parts of Minnesota our cattle are grazing cool season perennial forages, which given somewhat normal temperatures, grow pretty darn quickly once they break dormancy in spring. Due to this early growth activity you'll see a fair amount of green grass somewhere around the beginning to mid-May.

But while turning out livestock as early as possible might be a good thing in terms of getting animals on clean pasture and saving dwindling hay supplies, is early to mid-May a good time to start grazing from the perspective of forage health and productivity? There's a fair bit of evidence that shows that it may not be.

When grass begins to grow in early spring, the energy for growth generally comes from stored carbohydrates in the roots and crowns (bases) of the plant. Once the plant grows for a little while and grows some significant green leaf area, then energy for growth comes from the process of photosynthesis. If a plant is grazed or harvested without having enough leaf material available to utilize photosynthesis for regrowth, then that plant has to rely again on energy reserves to regrow. After a couple of cycles of utilizing energy reserves for growth, the plant cannot grow efficiently and may become unproductive or stunted for the rest of the growing season. Delaying turnout can help avoid this repeated grazing of short plants which are putting a bunch of stored energy into growth.

If you can allow forages to grow until they develop 3 or 4 leaves (4-8 inches for most cool season grass plants) prior to grazing, it's likely that they will have a good jump start on a productive growing season. This extra top growth will also result in extra root growth that can reach additional nutrients and water deeper in the soil profile: a big help later in the summer when the first couple inches of topsoil start to dry out.

2015 was a pretty good year for growing stored feed. So if you have a little hay left over this spring, consider delaying turnout until the forages are up and running, even if it's two or three weeks later than your typical turnout time. Hopefully you'll reap some benefits by producing more forage during the summer.



How do you minimize the effects of drought? Start with a plan

Drought effects on pasture forages can be severe, not only within periods of drought but for years following. It is critical that you prepare your farm for the next drought well before it occurs. And while you will never be able to fully avoid the effects of drought, you can minimize their severity by making a management plan.

The effects of drought are complex and dynamic and Nebraska Cooperative Extension's publication *Drought Management on Range and Pastureland* (EC 91-123) does a nice job of describing these effects in detail. Below we have pulled out some of the highlights from this publication, providing thoughts on three critical periods in which your business can respond to drought: before the drought occurs, during a drought, and in the years that follow.

Pre-drought

In addition to limiting the productivity of your pasture's forage, a severe drought can also put stress on your financial position, your business relationships, and your family life. So how do you prepare for something that has the potential to be so devastating? By collecting data, keeping good records, and constantly analyzing your position. Not only do you need to know details about your pastures, you also need to assess where you stand financially and personally.

- ◆ What is your current financial position, including financial assets and obligations?
- ◆ What are your short- and long-term family needs?
- ◆ What are your family goals?
- ◆ How secure is your relationship with the banker?
- ◆ Are you prepared to accept the additional stress of added risk?
- ◆ How soon must losses incurred during and following drought be recovered?
- ◆ Would you rather risk the loss of the ranch and/or breeding herd than sell out?

During drought

During drought your goal is to protect your natural resource from degradation by overgrazing while still accounting for your business' and family's financial needs. Have you considered early weaning, destocking, relocation, or slowing down or speeding up your rotation? Do you have access to other forages that you can store for extended periods of time without excessive spoilage? Have you considered using other water resources, such as dams, rivers, wells and pipelines, to ease the severity of a drought?

Whatever decision you make, be sure that decision is based on one or more quantifiable triggers. Be it regional precipitation patterns or daily temperature extremes at a given location, using these measurable triggers removes our reliance on gut feelings. Using these triggers works even better if they are supported by good, on-farm records. Being proactive and keeping records at the site level will help make drought time decisions that much easier in the future.

The year following

After a drought occurs, your number one goal is to rebuild a healthy pasture resource. This means not only considering the financial needs of the first year after drought but also considering the productivity of your land for years to come. The following ideas can be effective at guiding your pasture out of drought.

- ◆ Resist the temptation to restock to former levels in the year following drought.
- ◆ Plan to delay the initiation of the summer grazing season by 1 to 2 weeks to enhance plant recovery.
- ◆ Use rangeland resources efficiently.
- ◆ Determine the availability of alternative or reserve forages.
- ◆ Reserve 10 to 20 percent of your forage resources in case vegetation recovery falls short of expectations.
- ◆ Calculate stocking rates for each pasture.
- ◆ Make and implement decisions early to avoid crises.

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