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**Date:** 3/30/18

### **Headline: Spring Pasture Management**

**WARSAW, Mo.** – The time for turning cattle out to pastures is rapidly approaching. For some operations, this happens on a specific day. For other operations, turnout happens by default since winter-feeding may be occurring on the same pasture cattle will soon be grazing. Whatever the situation, management practices imposed on these fields in the next few weeks are critical to forage yield and forage quality later in the growing season.

For producers who turn cattle into pastures on a specific day, the question becomes “How tall should the pasture be before grazing begins?” The general recommendation is 4 to 6 inches of forage growth, but that recommendation comes with conditions.

If pastures are being rotationally grazed, the 4 to 6 inch recommended grazing height for initial turnout is probably too tall. Consider a 5-paddock grazing system with approximately weekly rotations to a new grazing paddock. This system allows for 28 days of rest before a paddock is re-grazed. This also means from the time grazing starts, it will be 5 weeks before the last paddock in the rotation is grazed. If grazing is not initiated until growth in the first paddock is 4 to 6 inches tall, by the time the last paddock gets grazed five weeks later, it will be headed out, have poor feed quality, and reduced annual yield.

The typical management recommendation for beef producers in the above situation is to turn cattle into pastures well before the 4 to 6 inch forage height is reached. Be prepared though to move cattle to a new paddock every day or two until grass growth begins to accumulate in the pasture. Then the rotation can be slowed down to more fully utilize the forage accumulation in a paddock. This strategy can help reduce seed head production, increase the amount of legumes in pastures, and keep pastures rapidly growing. Our goal at this time of year is to try to somewhat control forage growth in order to reduce seedheads and increase the amount of legumes in the pasture.

A second alternative is to slow initial rotations and mechanically harvest paddocks that head out and get over-mature before grazing can occur. This will re-set over-mature paddocks and subsequent regrowth will be vegetative and of high nutritional

quality. These paddocks will also have increased annual forage yield, provided the mechanical harvest is done in a timely manner.

An added benefit of timely harvesting over-mature paddocks is that the forage canopy is opened up for legumes such as red and white clover to compete for light, moisture and nutrients. Legumes improve forage quality and provide some nitrogen for the grasses.

Putting up forage in a timely manner in springtime is not always easy, but be prepared to act when weather conditions allow for harvesting hay or haylage. Start getting hay making machinery ready to operate now so you won't be repairing stuff when you should be harvesting.

A final management tool is the use of pasture yield measuring equipment, such as the rising plate meter. Charting growth rate and pasture availability can (1) help identify which paddocks need harvested for hay, (2) set the grazing rotation and (3) identify changes in growth rate. Knowing that forage growth rate is slowing can help with management decisions such as identifying some paddocks that might benefit from a small application of nitrogen or if changes in stocking rate or supplemental feeding is warranted.

If you would like more information on spring grazing management or the use of a rising plate meter to measure forage availability, contact me by e-mail at [schmitze@missouri.edu](mailto:schmitze@missouri.edu) or call the MU Extension Center in Warsaw at (660) 438-5012.

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