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Headline: 2019 Spring Grazing Management

WARSAW, Mo. – Now that spring has apparently arrived and grass is beginning to grow, many livestock producers are opening gates and allowing cattle to graze in pastures stressed by last summer’s drought and damaged by this winter’s wet weather. Care must be taken not to further damage and weaken already fragile grass stands.

First, evaluate how much desirable forage actually exists in pastures. One simple way to accomplish this is to lay out a 100’ tape measure and identify what type of plant is touching the tape at each 1-foot increment. The identification can be as simple as a “desirable grass”, “legume”, “weed”, or “bare ground”. Take several readings around the pasture and summarize the results. Excessive weed pressure or bare ground may indicate the need to renovate the pasture. If desirable forages are adequate, the second question is how to manage these without further damaging the stand.

Forage growth above ground reflects root growth below ground. Short top growth indicates short roots, which limits the ability of forages to persist. Turning cattle in to graze short pastures that may not have fully recovered from last summer’s drought may do additional stand damage by reducing desirable forage species. It is generally recommended to have approximately six inches of forage growth before turning in cattle to graze a pasture.

Rotational grazing systems can be extremely beneficial in helping manage damaged or stressed pastures. If certain paddocks must be grazed before the desired top growth is achieved, plan to give those paddocks extended periods of rest before re-grazing. Our typical recommendation of “fast growth equals fast rotations” may need some modification this grazing season. Early grazed paddocks may need to be left out of rotation longer than in more normal years simply to allow them to recover carbohydrate reserves and develop more extensive root systems.

Stressed plants can recover if given enough time to do so. Rest after grazing will be a key element of forage management this growing season. Producers who allow grazed forages enough recovery time should maintain or improve their forage stands.
Producers who do not allow for grazing recovery will continue to see stand degradation and increased weed pressure.

If you would like more information on managed grazing systems or other forage management options, contact me by email at schmitze@missouri.edu or by calling the Pettis County Extension Center at (660) 827-0591.

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