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I just finished reviewing the list of Pennsylvania Forage and Grassland Council's Outstanding Pasture Producer Award winner from past years. What is it that makes a pasture producer outstanding?

The word "outstanding" is defined by Webster as the "act of standing out". That does not mean "standing out" as in your fields or pastures, but is to be "conspicuous". In my definition, it means the grazier who does everything right *plus* a little more. It is the "little mores" that makes that difference.

The "little mores" refer to such things as paying attention to the needs of the forages while effectively meeting the feed demands of the grazing livestock, preventing overgrazing, keeping plant density at optimum, maintaining fertility levels, keeping good records, maximizing profits, extending the grazing season, and filling in the voids.

Now what do all of these things mean? Or how do I accomplish all of these? you may ask.

When a grazier is as concerned about the needs of the forage as they are the livestock, then the system is on the right track. It is most important that livestock perform to the optimum and return the most animal products (milk, meat, and wool) as possible.

The forages also have their needs. If they are consistently going to produce forages that allow our livestock to make maximum production, then we as producers must take care of those needs.

The needs refer to rest periods between grazings, stubble heights after grazing, optimum grazing heights for turn-in, and so on. It means that the grazier must be going out to look at what the forages are doing and planning the system around those observations. These observations are not to just monitor where tomorrow's forages are, but also those for two weeks down the road.

The prevention of overgrazing is

critical in maintaining the persistence of the stand. Proper rest periods need to be maintained between grazings. These vary from species or with the time of year. The stubble height left after grazing must be high enough to ensure an adequate reserve of energy for the regrowth of the plant.

The rest period is important so that the energy reserve level is able to be replenished before grazing occurs again.

Another consideration in overgrazing is the length of time that livestock have access to a pasture or paddock. This period should be three days or less. After three days, the plants are starting to regrow and grazing will remove this new growth before the energy reserves are replenished. This reduces the persistence of the stand and, if it continues, will kill the stand. If you limit the amount of land available to grazing, you can reduce the amount of spot grazing that occurs when livestock have too much forage available.

Plant density is another factor that needs attention, for several reasons. The number of plants per square foot, or other land unit, needs to be high so as much sunlight as possible is intercepted and converted into green plant tissue or energy. This increased forage output and should also provide for maximum livestock output per acre. It also means that there will be a good canopy of leaves over the soil to prevent erosion. By not having open area in the grass cover, weeds will not establish easily because the forages are competing for and utilizing the sunlight and nutrients that the weeds need for growth.

If you want to assess your pastures, be sure that when you are looking at them, you are looking straight down. Looking out over a stand always makes it look thick. Therefore, by looking straight down you eliminate this illusion. If you feel your stands are thin and you see more bare earth than you should, you need to consider strengthening the stands with no-till for grasses and perhaps frost-seeding for legumes. There are other methods of establishment. You need to use whatever works for you. What is important is that you get the stand density increased to make better pastures.

Maintaining or building up fertility levels is key in establishing and maintaining good productive pastures. The use of soil tests to bring field conditions to proper levels is highly recommended when you establish pastures. Retesting every 3 to 5 years will ensure that your levels are being maintained. Top dressing every year is recommended, especially for nitrogen if you do not have at least 30 percent legumes in your stands to provide the nitrogen source.

To extend the grazing season, either earlier in the spring and/or later into the fall and even winter months, you need to consider what forages or crop residues are available at that time and plan to utilize them. This is possible by having a perimeter fencing system around your whole farm which allows you to take advantage of being able to graze crop residues or fall-seeded small grains. You can even fill in those summer slump months with other forages to graze, such as brassicas or annual warm season grasses.

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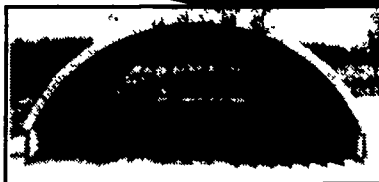
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