PFGC ❖ PASTURE PONDERINGS ❖

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Recently, I conducted a discussion on horse pasture management with a group of graziers.

As part of the discussion, I explained why it is important to provide a rest period for the forages. I emphasized that in a continuous grazed pasture, there is no rest period; however, if you split a pasture in two, then each paddock is rested 50 percent of the time.

If you split a pasture into 16 paddocks, each paddock is rested 94 percent of the time.

I had just finished this discussion when one of the participants offered this comment: "If I split my pastures in half, my horses would ruin my pastures twice as fast."

It quickly became apparent to me that grazing control concepts are not as easily understood as perhaps I though they were.

I will devote this column to explaining some of the basic concepts of grazing management and control.

First, let's define some of the terminology. The term "rest period," refers to the amount of time a specific land area is allowed to regrow before animals are allowed to regraze it. "Grazing period" is the length of time that grazing livestock occupy a specific land area. A "grazing cycle" is the total time between the beginning of one grazing period to the beginning of another or, in simple terms, the grazing period plus the rest period.

The "specific land area" referred to above denotes a pasture, a paddock, or whatever subdivision of land that the animals have access to at that point in time.

There are three basic ways to control grazing management of forages. The first control is by changing the number of livestock that will graze a piece of land, commonly called "stocking density." The second control is applied when we have a set number of animals and we change the size of the piece of land we allow them to graze. The third control is that of time; when we have a set number of animals and a set size of land for them to graze, we alter the time they have access to graze. The three controls are the numbers of livestock, the size of grazing unit, and the time to graze. Most grazing systems use time and size to control their grazing because most producers do not have the ability to easily change herd numbers.

Generally, a paddock should be grazed for no more than three days. The reason for this is that by day four, regrowth is occurring. This regrowth is very palatable and the livestock usually seek them out for this reason. Overgrazing then becomes a problem and often causes a stand to be destroyed.

The shorter the grazing period, the better utilization of the forage. The reason for that is that the longer the livestock are in a paddock, the more fouling and treading that will occur. There will also be much less selective grazing occurring when the grazing period is short. The livestock generally eat the highest quality forage first and eat the less desirable stuff second. They also tend to eat more when introduced to fresh forage, so there are animal performance reasons to move livestock to new paddocks in addition to maintaining forage quality.

A quick and easy way to determine if your system is operating properly is to simply walk a paddock from which you just removed the livestock and observe what has occurred. If there is a lot of unharvested forage, you may need to reduce the size of the paddocks. If the stubble height left is too low for

(Turn to Page 15)