

❖ SPECIAL REPORT ❖

PLAN NOW TO MAXIMIZE GRAZING POTENTIAL

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One characteristic found in successful farmers is the skill of advanced planning and then following through on that plan. Successful graziers definitely exhibit this skill, in fact grazing probably involves greater levels of advanced planning than some other areas of agriculture.

Experienced graziers are observing their livestock and pastures on a daily basis; however, most are also thinking and planning for several weeks in the future. They realize that decisions made today can have a tremendous impact on their future grazing opportunities. Their goal is to maximize forage quality and utilization by planning for the union of animal needs with forage plant management.

Unfortunately for graziers there is no simple textbook for success. That also holds true for any agricultural livelihood. Although there are many advocates of these types of guides, in truth, each enterprise has its own unique needs and situations that require flexibility. Pasturing requires a lot of flexibility. The fact that

the grazing environment is constantly changing due to early spring flush, moisture availability, summer heat and slump, or yearly weather swings forces the grazer to be very flexible and to plan ahead.

Planning helps the grazer to recognize potentials and limitations. A plan provides the opportunity to rethink the process and to allow for other considerations. By careful advance planning you are better able to maximize the multiple opportunities available from each decision.

Advanced planning is a thought process. It cannot be bought in a guide or a book. Successful graziers have it, and most are thinking of grazing plans for this fall and taking steps now to be ready to graze in October, November, and maybe into December.

Extending the Grazing Season

Available from county extension offices is Agronomy Facts #41 "Strategies for Extending the Grazing Season." This fact sheet, written by Marvin Hall and Jerry Jung, highlights strategies or plans that can be used to extend the grazing season and decrease the need for stored feeds. Two strategies are the basis for late

season grazing—first is stockpiling and second is the utilization of forage plants that continue to grow and develop under cooler conditions.

Stockpiling

Stockpiling is the practice of selecting fields in late summer and then managing these fields with the intent of grazing later in the season. A major factor in selection of fields to be stockpiled is growth characteristics of the grass species.

Reed Canarygrass is a species of cool season grass that is very sensitive to day length and night temperatures. As days get shorter in early October, the plant ceases to grow and rapidly loses forage quality. Orchardgrass continues to develop in the fall but shading and leaf disease quickly degrade lower plant leaves. Endophyte-free tall fescue, bromegrass, and ryegrass as forage grass species that have characteristics that favor fall growth and development. Of these three species, perhaps the best suited to stockpiling is tall fescue, due to the fact that tall fescue does not lose its leaves and can retain forage quality even under snow cover.

To stockpile tall fescue, animals should be removed from paddocks from mid to late August through mid-October. Fertilizing with 50 pounds per acre of nitrogen or even a complete fertilizer such as 50-50-50 per acre will provide the nutrients necessary to maximize growth and development during this time period. Begin strip grazing or use of small paddocks after frost.

Just as planning ahead is important now for fall grazing, stockpiling will require advanced consideration of grazing plans for spring of 2004. Keep in mind that by accumulating vegetation in the fall for stockpiling, reduced tiller formation will result due to competition for light. This causes poor winter survival and slow recovery next spring on heavily grazed paddocks. Frequently, the grazer who has planned ahead will keep one or two paddocks in reserve for early spring grazing to stagger the spring flush. Paddocks grazed latest, before dormancy, will be slowest to recover in the spring.

Late Summer Establishment

Another opportunity for late season grazing is to establish annual forage crops in mid August/early September. These include small grains (oats, rye, barley, triticale or wheat) and brassica crops, such as turnips and rape.

Winter annual small grains can provide grazing in fall and spring if certain management practices are planned and followed. These include seeding three to four weeks earlier than for grain production, increasing the seeding rate to three bushels/acre, and applying 40 pounds/acre of nitrogen at planting. Seeding should be planned early and then if drought conditions are present, establishment can be delayed until soil moisture assures germination. Moderate grazing in the fall should not reduce spring silage or grain yields. In spring when the plant's growing point

emerges, grazing should be stopped if silage or grain harvest is intended.

Spring oats can also be sown in August for fall grazing. Sown at 2½ to 3 bushels/acre and fertilized with 50 pounds of N, this high yielding forage is ready in six to eight weeks. In addition, oats have the ability to withstand a heavy freeze without losing quality.

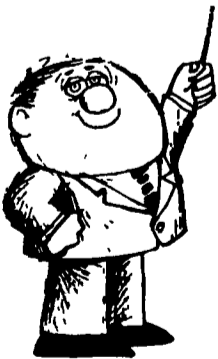
Most graziers of small grains will limit grazing by using a temporary fence and strip grazing to reduce trampling and dunging losses. Nutritionists recommend adding one ounce of magnesium oxide daily to lactating cow's normal mineral supplement to reduce the risk of grass tetany and to avoid nitrate poisoning that may result from applying any N fertilizer well before the intended grazing period of small grains.

Turnips and rape can be successfully grazed in the fall when planned in late July to mid-August. Maximum production is reached in 80 to 90 days. In Pennsylvania, an average carrying capacity of a good brassica stand would be approximately 1,550 ewe grazing or 160 cow grazing days per acre. More complete information on using brassicas can be found in a second Agronomy Fact Sheet #33, available from your local extension office.

So start practicing what many experienced graziers are already doing. Plan ahead. Begin by looking at your pasture not thinking about tomorrow or next week, but this summer, fall, and the spring of 2004.

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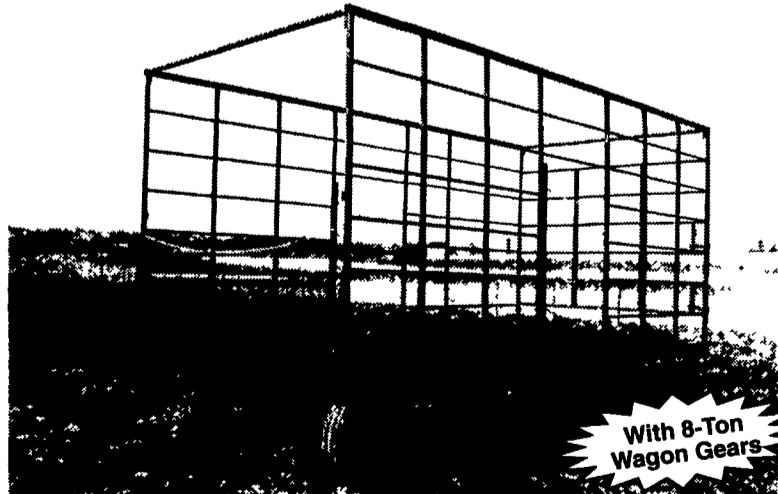
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