

Spring Grazing Challenges

Yoana Newman, University of Wisconsin-River Falls

Spring is the time when pastures experience a renewal – its arrival does not necessarily follow the calendar but rather soil temperatures needed to re-activate perennials. Spring also brings grazing challenges. Since plants are waking up after a long winter, farmers should be thinking about: How soon can I move my cattle into pastures? How long should I allow them to graze the same pasture? How long should I rest pastures between grazings?

Other challenges needing to be addressed are the presence of winter injury or the need for reseeding or renovation. Other considerations relating to the logistical side include fence condition, degree of weed control, and fertilization needs. This year, we face the possibility of increased winter injury due to the polar vortex.

As soon as possible evaluate pastures for winterkill. The combination of lack of snow cover and extreme cold may have had a negative impact on pasture vegetation. Frigid temperature impact will not be evident until late spring, but an evaluation of live plants is a critical first step in determining if winter injury has occurred. Check your fields for winterkill by digging up and examining plant material from various field sites. Usually, anything <10 plants/ft² would not be considered economical to keep.

How soon can I move animals into pasture? Caution is advised when deciding to initiate spring grazing. During spring, day length and temperature are rising, leading to higher forage growth rates. During these periods, less plant fiber is present compared to other times of year. Allow sufficient time for forage to initiate spring regrowth with full leaves. Have a plan to deal with excess forage later in the spring, including harvesting excess forage or grazing with two or more livestock groups. Have a grazing group with higher needs, such as your milking herd, graze first, immediately followed by a second group with lower nutritional requirements such as dry cows. If grazing early, use a different paddock each spring.



In spring, allow pastures to have sufficient growth before grazing.

Spring forage is usually very high in protein and low in fiber, resulting in diarrhea or bloat depending on pasture botanical composition. Bloat can occur if animals are brought into pastures with immature clovers or alfalfa. To minimize this, allow for a gradual transition from stored forage into pastures over a two-week period.

Another consideration affecting the start of spring grazing is how wet your pastures are. Moving cattle into paddocks which are too wet may cause unnecessary soil compaction due to hoof action.

How long should pastures be grazed and rested? Grazing is a compromise between forage quality and quantity available. The longer animals remain in a paddock, the higher the chance they will go back to the same spot they first grazed, reducing the opportunity for plants to build reserves for regrowth. If pastures are adequately stocked, grazing will be uniform. Livestock should be ready to move into the next paddock after two or three days, but this could extend to a week depending on pasture condition. Canopy height is an indicator of when to move to the next paddock. Half of the canopy should be grazed and half should remain in order for the plants to make new leaves and build reserves before next grazing.

Grazing rotations vary depending on the operation. For example, dairy cattle grazing is usually intense and consists of short periods (half a day) with shorter rest periods (three weeks). Beef cattle may graze 3-4 days with rest periods in the range of four weeks.

Other Considerations...

Check pasture fences. Following winter, your fences may be damaged from debris, fallen trees, or the previous grazing season. Check permanent and temporary fences. During spring, soil is soft, making it easier to replace posts, grounding systems, wires, and/or braces if needed.

Need for weed control and fertilizer. Scout your pasture early. Control weeds first, then apply fertilizer or manure as needed. If pastures are too wet to graze, take advantage of the situation to control your pasture weeds.