Spring Pasture Considerations

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The weather has finally begun to warm and pastures are beginning to grow. With increasing fertilizer and equipment costs it is important to minimize forage wasted by cattle. The following management recommendations will allow maximum carrying capacity yet maintain pasture vitality.

But before we talk about pasture recommendations, remember the following. Grasses should be maintained in a vegetative state, where new leaf growth predominates. Grass plants allowed to mature will not be consumed readily due to decreased palatability, have reduced nutritional content, and proceed to the reproductive stage resulting in seed production. Nutrient content of legumes declines less rapidly than grasses with maturation.

Consider delaying spring grazing until the pasture is at least 4 to 6 inches in height for low growing species and 6 to 8 inches for tall growing grasses. Waiting to place cattle on pasture will allow increased root development that will encourage rapid plant regrowth. Encourage even grazing to maximize forage production. Avoid over grazing pastures to prevent weakening of plants which will increase the interval between grazing periods.

To maximize carrying capacity of your pastures, consider rotational grazing. It is easier to maintain a wide variety of desirable pasture plant species through the use of rotational grazing than with continuous grazing. If your cattle are not efficiently using the available forage, ie there are areas in the pasture where the grass is tall and others are short, do not clip these areas. Clipping is expensive and wastes grass. Rather reduce the pasture size so the cattle must graze all of the forage.

Monitoring soil fertility is important to ensure adequate growth and persistence of desired grasses and legumes. A well planned pasture fertilization and management program will result in increased production that is two to three times or more productive than unfertilized pastures. Also maintaining soil fertility keeps plants vigorous enabling them to withstand heavier grazing, resist insects and disease, and compete against weeds.

Pasture soil should be tested every 2 to 3 years to determine pH and levels of phosphorous, potassium, and magnesium. Soil pH should be maintained between 6.0 and 7.0 for maximum productivity of most grasses and legumes. If lime is needed, it can be applied anytime field conditions are appropriate.

Permanent pastures that contain over 25 percent legumes usually need little to no nitrogen. Legume or legume-grass pastures have a higher requirement for phosphorus and potassium than do grass pastures. These two nutrients not only increase legume yields but also enhance disease resistance, winter hardiness, and longer stand life.

One of the most important factors in maintaining productive pastures is adjusting stocking rates. Stocking rates are affected by how much forage the cattle will consume and how much forage is available. Annual rainfall and timing of this rain throughout the year affects pasture production more than any other factor. During periods of heat and drought stress, stocking rates will be lower. However, implementation of a rotational grazing program will aid in the persistence of species during periods of drought stress by regulating the frequency and intensity of grazing.

Proper pasture management is an important component of all cattle enterprises. Proper pasture management will ensure the productivity of fields to maximize the carrying capacity of your pastures while minimizing forage wasted by cattle. Δ

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