

# Proactive Forage Management for Grazing Success

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Attend any forage focused Extension program and you will assuredly discuss the importance of soil fertility, forage quality, having a forage plan, and utilizing proper seeding and planting practices. Each of these are key fundamentals to efficient and effective forage management and utilization and should not be overlooked in this article. A limitation of even one of these areas can have a dramatic effect on overall forage production and operational productivity. Today, however, we are going to take a closer look at what's happening between the pasture and the highway and discuss a few other key variables in forage management.

## The Goal of Grazing Management

Whether a large producer with generations of experience, or a smaller operation just starting out, the overall goal of forage grazing management is the same: **Efficient production and utilization of a forage base that is able to meet the needs of the livestock herd.**

Below are three key principles needed to keep fresh in our mind as we begin to graze the green pasture that is waking up from the grips of winter and burst into spring!

### Principle 1: "Manage Forage with Managed Grazing using a Grazing System!"

Begin with defining your grazing system. A grazing system, a combination of multiple forages, practices, and grazing methods to achieve a specific overall goal, is essential in forage production. Knowing the what, when, where, and how much livestock graze is pertinent to good forage management. It doesn't matter whether it is the utilization of a single unit of land with unrestricted access, or a management intensive system utilizing multiple grazing methods and pasture alternatives. Having a defined grazing system, whatever it may be, is essential in managing forage production surplus and pitfalls, and to effectively evaluate operational adjustments that can improve forage efficiency. Understand that just like the snowflakes that fall in the winter, no two operations will be identical. Each operation is different and what works well for one producer might not fit into another producer's operation at all. Defining and adjusting a grazing system can have a positive impact on grazing efficiency and forage utilization. An impact that is often apparent after even the first grazing season. But remember even the best planned grazing system will not persist if forages are being negatively impacted by poor soil fertility and overstocking.

### Principle 2: "Manage Forage Height and Rest for Grazing Success!"

Timely harvest of forage can be the difference between good and poor quality and between profit and loss. It is important to utilize forage at, or as near to, the optimum time period as possible to get the best mix of good quality forage into our livestock. Make sure grazing begins and ends at recommended heights to help manage the forage and maintain forage and livestock performance. Poor management and overstocking can result in overgrazing. The effects of overgrazing pastures can result in thinning stands, increased bare soil, and mounting weed pressure. Managing forage by following species specific height recommendations will provide positive benefits that are apparent in stand persistence and animal performance. Focusing on forage height and rest requires management that favors stand survival and utilization of higher-quality forage by livestock.

### Principle 3: "Meeting Livestock Needs with Available Forage: Managing Stocking Rate"

As most cattlemen will admit, even though we may know we don't need more it is sometimes very difficult to control the urge to increase our herd size, especially when we look at current cattle prices, however it is very easy to quickly become overstocked. Adding more animals to the herd may seem like easy money, but the effects of overstocking, even for a short period of time, can be devastating to forage production, and your

Forage Species	Begin Grazing (in.)	End Grazing (in.)	Usual # Days Rest
Tall Fescue	8-12	4-8	15-30
Bermudagrass	4-8	1-2	7-15
Bahiagrass	6-10	1-2	10-20
Summer Annuals (Sorghums/Milletts)	20-24	8-12	10-20
Annual Ryegrass	6-12	3-4	7-15

+Adapted from *Southern Forages 5th Edition*

pocketbook. Overstocking, having too many animals and not enough forage, is one of the most common occurrences on livestock farms today. Maintaining stocking rates, the number of animals on a given amount of land over a given period of time, that effectively utilizes available forage is the single most important management practice when considering profitability of livestock. Overstocking leads to overgrazing. Overgrazing results in pastures with high levels of undesirable plants and low levels of quality forage, an increased need for dollars spent on additional supplementation and stored feed to maintain livestock performance, and added expense in seed costs and establishment once a stand has been depleted. When forage production becomes a limiting factor for an extended period of time, it's time to consider adjusting stocking or destocking completely to let the forage recover from overuse and abuse. No single adjustment in management can have a bigger impact on profitability of livestock than correcting stocking rates. Anticipate forage pitfalls before they happen to proactively manage stocking.

Use the following equation to calculate your current stocking rate:

$$\frac{\text{Number of Animals}}{\text{Total Acres (to be grazed)}} = \frac{\text{Animals}}{\text{Acre}} = \text{Current Stocking Rate}$$

Although cattle prices may be looking nice right now, the reality is that cheap inputs aren't coming back. Grass is the cheapest feed available and there's more "green" in grazing! The most cost effective harvester may have four legs, but without anything to harvest, it cost as much as the mechanical kind that can rust!

#### Forage Thoughts to Ruminare on:

Waiting until the next stress event to determine how we are going to feed our animals is being reactive - being reactive puts us further behind than where we began - it's time to start managing our forages **proactively** as it's not a matter of **if** we will see more stress, it's just a matter of **when**!

So let's shake off the chills from the cold winter slumber, and proactively manage our forage right through the slump of summer!



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