Fall Forage Planning

Options to consider for pastures at season's end.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

For cattle producers, fall can feel like a time to ease up on the summer grazing schedule. Often once fall arrives, the temptation is to "open the gates" and let the livestock have the run of the pastures. But range managers agree this is one of the most costly mistakes that can be made.

Why? Grazing down residual forage below 4 inches (in.)tends to damage the root reserves, which contribute to next year's plant growth. And removing the forage residual reduces plant cover that protects the soil microbes (and roots) from fluctuating temperatures, which can also affect the plant's future productivity.

The bottom line: where possible, allow pastures to rest in the fall, so they can regrow and be ready for another grazing season come spring.

Leaving extra plant residue in place is also important to help catch fall and winter moisture, and allows it to infiltrate the soil instead of running off.

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Thus, monitoring your fall and winter forage management is a key strategy to ensure cow herd performance, and prepare the productivity and resilience of your pastures for next spring and summer.

Access your resources

Just as a coach would evaluate the fitness status and skill levels of players on his team, fall is a good time to assess your forage and pasture resources. Your management decisions will be based on that inventory.

In areas challenged with drought conditions, limited forage resources may require producers to consider early weaning, reduce herd size, or offer supplemental feed.

For areas that have had abundant precipitation and extra forage production, there are several strategies to consider, according to South Dakota Range Management Specialist Emily Helms with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Helms advises if livestock numbers weren't adjusted during the summer in order to utilize the extra forage, producers have a few fall options. These include:

Continuing to graze until "you're outta grass." If that's the plan, Helms suggests making sure grass is allowed adequate regrowth prior to a hard freeze in order to promote good root regrowth. This is important as it allows the plant to store up root reserves for going into winter. Appropriate stubble heights and regrowth heights for each grass species vary, so Helms says, "It's best to talk to a range management specialist in order to determine adequate heights to keep your forage in tip-top shape going into the winter." USDA-NRCS or your land-grant university extension specialists can assist with range management information.

Leaving the extra grass to "feed the bugs" — more specifically, the soil microbes underground. Helms explains, "Leaving this year's extra forage to help replenish the ground cover will promote good soil biological activity. In areas where rain and forage have been sparse in the past few years, a little extra forage leftover going into the fall will help grasslands rebuild their resiliency and allow them to recover after being hit hard year after year."

Considering fall or winter grazing or dormant season grazing. Helms says, "Grazing plants after they have become dormant is a valid option, but supplementation may be needed, especially on introduced cool season grasses. These pastures may require additional protein supplementation."

To assess your specific supplementation needs, she recommends visiting with a livestock

nutritionist to make sure livestock are getting the best quality diet possible for their stage in production. Additionally, Helms emphasizes when dormant season grazing, the maximum recommended utilization is 60% (of leaf material).

She notes, "Even though the plant is dormant, it can still be overgrazed."

The leftover plant residue will help catch snow, provide erosion control and provide cover over the winter for wildlife. The residue may also provide nesting cover in the spring, depending on the species of grass being utilized.

What about hay fields? Helms says fall management of these resources should be similar to grazed pastures — allowing adequate forage regrowth to occur prior to a killing frost. Depending on the forage species of the hay field, these heights can range from 6 to 10 in. These heights are recommended in order to maximize the lifespan of a forage planting, ensure good spring growth and limit winter injury.

Consider crop residue

As your forage management game plan comes together for fall and winter, another winning strategy to consider is utilizing crop residue to extend your grazing season. Seasoned range managers point out alternative sources of forage like crop residue — such as corn stalks, soybean residues or even cover crops — provide a great source of nutrient-rich feed for livestock, while also giving your summer pastures a longer rest period than they would normally have.

Many states are now creating websites or Facebook pages to help link crop producers with available crop residues to livestock producers seeking grazing opportunities. In Nebraska, the Crop Residue Exchange (*https://cropresidueexchange.unl.edu/*) is one such site. This site also includes a page where cover crops available for grazing can be listed. South Dakota and Minnesota offer similar sites at *https://sdgrazingexchange.com/* and *www.mda.state.mn.us/cropland-grazing-exchange-1*.

For landowners who may be concerned about possible negative effects to the next crop from grazing, University of Nebraska research has shown there's no need to worry. In fact, the UNL research showed when corn residue was grazed at proper stocking rates (15% residue removal), crop production after grazing was not reduced. Instead, grazing corn residue produced small increases to the following year's soybean yield. AJ

Select a sacrifice pasture

Most producers already have a "winter pasture" where cattle are held after the snow falls or the rainy season begins. This is usually close to the farmstead or some type of barn shelter, so the cattle can be reached and given supplemental feed during inclement weather. It's important to stockpile this "sacrifice" area during the growing season, so that when livestock are moved here from mid-winter through spring, there is some forage available.

Livestock experts advise storing hay bales close to these areas to provide additional wind protection, and so access to feed is available even in the worst winter blizzard. Once spring green-up occurs and cattle can be moved to other pastures, allow this sacrifice area to rest and regrow until the next winter season.