

Two Grazing Management Topics
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Indiana beef producers are blessed with some of the best grazing land for livestock in the country. We have a variety of productive soils plus good weather with adequate moisture, most of the time, and a fairly long growing season that often allows us to extend the grazing season well into the fall.

How well are Indiana beef producers taking advantage of these resources? Some producers are maximizing their resources and others have a ways to go. As I visit and work with producers across Indiana, I find several management issues that are either overlooked or misunderstood. These issues can really hurt the operation's pocketbook if not properly addressed. We'll look briefly at two of them.

First of all, livestock water problems are common. Problems include, but are not limited to, lack of water, drinking water quality and distance to water from the grazing area. When water quality, quantity or distance is a problem, you will have lower milk production, lower weaning weights and reduced grazing efficiency. All of these problems can cost you money. Improving the quality, quantity and location of water will pay dividends that more than offset the cost of improvements.

Pastures are often overstocked and simultaneously overgrazed. Many pastures are never given a rest period. Forages need rest like everything else. Providing a rest period lets the forages recover from being grazed". Resting also helps to maintain plant growth. For the forage plant to continue to survive and thrive, it needs to keep enough growth above ground to efficiently harvest sunlight, produce foliage and support the root system.

The more forage you maintain above ground, the more root structure you will have below ground. The increased root structure will provide more drought tolerance, stability and improved plant health.

Under-stocking pastures can also cause problems, because it makes it more challenging to maintain high quality forage.

Rotational grazing can help improve both over and under grazed situations. Rest periods improve the health of the forage stand and breaking fields into smaller units or paddocks allows the producer to control pasture utilization and quality. Rotational grazing reaps some added benefits such as extra hay. I have heard many people I've worked with exclaim, "I've never taken any hay off that pasture before". A well-managed rotational grazing system will increase forage yield, improve overall forage quality and reduce waste. All of these improvements mean more dollars in the producer's pocket.

Use of unimproved varieties like Kentucky 31 Tall Fescue, can have detrimental impacts on the operation, especially when it is not managed carefully. The alkaloids produced by the endophytes in tall fescue can cause numerous health and fertility problems. Newer varieties of tall fescue don't have these problems and are becoming as productive as Kentucky 31 without the negative side effects.

There is a variety of high-energy grasses and legumes that producers can utilize. Whatever forage you choose, it needs to fit the needs of the livestock, the grazing system, and the soil conditions present. Producers should also consider some forage species diversity. This plant diversity may be in the same field, or more ideally, in separate fields. Forage plant diversity is often most beneficial during adverse weather conditions. Some species will do better under wet conditions and others during dry times.

Lots of pastures lack sufficient quantities of legumes. Legumes such as clovers, alfalfa, birdsfoot trefoil or lespedeza not only add energy to the sward, but they also provide additional crude protein and produce excess nitrogen to feed the grass portion of the stand.

Next to water concerns, pasture fertility is probably one of the biggest issues producers have to deal with. It is extremely difficult to maintain a stand of quality forages and a herd of quality cows without adequate soil fertility levels. Sure, you can get by with lower levels of nutrients of phosphorus and potassium, but you also are "getting by" with lower yields, lower quality forages, and lower carrying capacities. It is much easier to maintain fertility than to try and build it with livestock alone. With a well-managed rotational grazing system, the cows return 75% or more of the nutrients passing through them back to the soil and distribute the nutrients fairly evenly. Continuous grazing systems, especially with only one water source end up having "hot" spots of fertility close to the water source, shady spots and favorite hangouts. The parts of the continuously grazed pasture furthest from water will eventually end up as the least productive and have lowest fertility. The cattle will graze these parts of the pasture and then quickly turn around and go back to the water source or favorite spot and deposit all the nutrients in that area.

There may be a variety of other management and environmental concerns that need to be addressed. These may include poorly designed feeding areas, animal waste problems, lack of good calving facilities, animal movement issues, livestock identification, fencing problems, energizer/charger problems and how to deal with extremely muddy conditions.

Managed rotational grazing is a complex topic. Watch for more detailed information on these subjects in future issues.