

Winter 2001 - 2002

PLAN YOUR GRAZING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

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Late fall and winter is a good time to plan or reconsider the existing plan of your grazing system. The past grazing season is still fresh in your mind, and you can build upon the past experiences and plan for making any improvements. Improving your pasture management can lower the cost of production by:

1. Growing more leaves on every acre -- converting more solar energy to animal feed.
2. Harvesting more forage per acre by increasing the grazing utilization rate.
3. Planning for proper rest periods for the forage plants.
4. Grazing more legumes -- legumes make for higher quality forage, have more summer growth and fertilize the grass portion of the pasture with nitrogen.
5. Extending the grazing season -- typically it costs 50 to 70 cents a day more per cow to feed hay than to graze the forage.

Identifying under utilized areas in the pasture along with mapping out weed and fertility problems are possible in fall. Planning and making decisions on ways to correct or improve those concerns can be a good use of management time. Are more or better watering systems needed to get the animals to graze the under used areas more? Pulling soil tests and monitoring the soil fertility and pH can help improve increased forage production and persistence. Weed control for next year can be scheduled; mowing, grazing or the use of an herbicide can have an impact on the undesirable plants, when used at the proper time.

Converting cropland to pasture is another major decision made in fall and winter. When considering converting cropland to pasture, the rules of thumb are: class I and II land will produce 2 animal unit grazing days for every bushel of corn that the field typically produces. Classes III and IV cropland will produce 3 days of animal unit grazing for every bushel of corn that it could produce. The competitive advantage is to pasture with marginal cropland. The average production cost for producing corn is about \$145 an acre, which is about the cost of establishing a grazing system on a per acre basis.

Data collected at the Fayette County, Ohio Agronomic Farm shows the benefit of having forages in a crop rotation. The information collected from 1990 to 1997 had alfalfa with the highest net income per acre at \$277.73 followed by soybeans at \$103.85, then corn and wheat. The eight-year average net return of nine systems was also collected; three different rotations under three different production systems a high input, standard input and low input levels. The crop rotations were:

1. a 4 crop rotation of corn, soybeans, wheat, alfalfa
2. a 3 crop rotation of corn, soybeans, wheat
3. a 2 crop rotation of corn, soybeans

The three production systems with alfalfa in the rotation generated the highest average net returns per acre compared to the other production systems for the other crop rotations. The side benefit was that it appears that the 4-year crop rotation with forage was getting better yields with time.