

A well managed pasture is one whose productivity is optimized for both the plants (forage) and the animals (livestock & sometimes wildlife). It also is not negatively affecting the quality of the soil, water and air. Pasture condition scoring is a way to check how well a pasture is being managed. Good quality, well managed pastures will have a good to excellent overall score. Lower scores indicate where management could be improved. Poor plant growth, high populations of weeds, soil erosion, increased runoff, poor animal performance and impaired water quality are all signs that indicate problems within the pasture.

Pasture condition scoring involves the visual evaluation of 10 indicators and each is given one of five condition ratings according to what is seen in the field. Each condition ranges from very poor to excellent.

**Desirable plants** determine if the plants present are plants that will readily be eaten by livestock. A desirable species is readily consumed, persistent, and provides high yielding quality forage for most of the growing season.

**Plant cover**, which is the percentage of soil surface covered by plants, is important for pasture production and soil and water protection.

**Plant diversity** indicating the number of different forage plants that are well represented (20% or more of plant cover) in the pasture.

**Plant residue**, in various states of decay, provides additional surface cover and organic matter to the soil.

**Plant Vigor** indicates if the desirable species are healthy and growing at their potential for the season when rated. Plant color, size, rate of regrowth, and productivity help to determine vigor.

**Percent legume** is important because it is a source of nitrogen that is critical for the pasture and they also improve the forage quality of a pasture mix when they are at least 20 percent of the stand.

**Uniformity of use** is checked by observing animal grazing patterns. Uniform grazing results in all desirable and intermediate species being grazed to a similar height.

**Livestock concentration areas** are places in pastures where livestock return frequently and linger to be near water, feed, mineral, shelter or just to be in shade. Typically, well-worn trails lead to these preferred areas. Depending on where they are in the landscape, they can direct sediment, nutrients, and bacteria towards nearby water-bodies.

**Soil compaction** impacts water infiltration rates and runoff. The lack of infiltration decreases water availability for plant growth in the soil.

**Erosion** is soil loss caused by rain drop impact. Sheet and rill erosion increases as ground cover decreases. Erosion also occurs along stream-banks and in water concentrated areas causing gullies. Frequency of use, livestock traffic patterns and the attractiveness to some sites to livestock (sunning, dusting, travel lanes, watering, rubbing areas) can heighten erosion problems.