

Managing Your Spring Grazing

If you're a producer, long cold winters can cause problems, as you try to balance dwindling feed supplies and spring pasture availability. You may be forced to take your cattle to pasture earlier than recommended, which will affect your livestock and pasture production. While it is tempting to take your cattle to pasture soon after the snow disappears, it can cost you in lost livestock and forage production if you don't take precautions.

In the spring, beef cows are likely to be in late gestation or early lactation, with young calves at foot. These are two critical stages of production and the animals' high nutritional needs must be met. If they're not, it can lead to lower conception rates and lower average daily gains. Generally, early spring pasture doesn't have enough forage to meet a lactating cow's daily dry matter intake needs. Pastures that were previously overgrazed and are being used for spring grazing may yield less than 100 pounds of dry matter forage per acre. A restricted forage intake will affect your cow's body condition and will reduce milk yields for the calf. Grasses should be in the four-leaf stage and six inches tall before grazing begins.

Grazing too early in the spring can be costly, as every day a pasture is grazed too early, you'll lose three days in the fall. A well-managed pasture will yield significantly more forage than a poorly managed one. Rotational grazing, that allows plants to rest and recover, will improve overall stand health and will increase forage production. Over grazing stresses plants, lowers yields and can lead to stand degradation by unpalatable invasive weeds and woody species.

Meeting spring nutritional needs

If you pasture your cattle earlier than recommended, there are grazing practices that will reduce the negative impact on the pasture and ensure your cattle's nutritional needs are met.

Sacrifice pasture: You can choose a field and keep your cattle on it until other pastures are ready for grazing. But this type of grazing needs supplementation with hay and/or concentrates to meet your livestock's nutritional needs. You can use the same pasture year after year or choose a different pasture each year. Pick pastures that are high and dry to avoid punching soft, wet soils that will further injure your forages and reduce your production. Regardless of the pasture you use, a long rest period of at least 60 days will be needed after the early season grazing.

Skim graze: This practice moves cattle through the pasture system at a rapid rate. The objective is to graze off the tips of the leaves and allow the plant to continue photosynthesis with the remaining part of the plant. The rate at which your cattle are moved from pasture to pasture will depend on the forage species and stocking rate.

In June, when moisture is adequate and days are long, forages can grow very rapidly. You should make first grazing passes quickly over the paddocks to clip the grass and keep it in the vegetative state. Leave adequate leaf material behind to fuel the growth for subsequent grazing passes. Once the days get shorter and hotter (July and August), cool season grass grows more slowly, so grazing passes should be slowed as well. Allow your livestock more time to graze the forage that has built up during the earlier period of more rapid growth (June). **Remember, fast growth equals fast moves, slow growth equals slow moves!**

Planning for spring grazing

1. Stockpiled forage: Pasture regrowth, 2nd or 3rd cut hay can be stockpiled and used at a later time, such as the fall, early winter or early the following spring. The regrowth from forages that were grazed or cut during the growing season is more nutritious for stockpiled grazing. Research shows that lactating cows on stockpiled forage will need supplementation, which should be feed-tested before you use it.

Feed quality results of stockpiled forage from the Western Beef Development Centre (University of Saskatchewan's Livestock and Forage Centre of Excellence) ranged from 50 to 58 per cent Total Digestible Nutrients (TDN) and six to 10 per cent Crude Protein (CP). Lactating cows require greater than 60 per cent TDN and greater than 10 to 11 per cent CP. This will vary depending on the age of the cow and its milking ability. Good quality alfalfa or alfalfa grass hay, grain or silage can be supplemented to lactating cows to meet their needs if they are grazing stockpiled forage in the spring. Placing your cattle on stockpiled forage early in the season provides feed for the animals and a clean space for newborn calves to stay healthy.

2. Winter & spring cereals: Fall rye, winter wheat or winter triticale can be seeded in the fall and grazed the following spring, or seeded in the spring to be grazed in the same year. A mixture of spring and winter cereals will provide flexibility for both grazing and can be cut for greenfeed or silage. A mixture can be grazed earlier in the season, left to regrow and then cut for winter feed after the spring cereal heads out. The winter cereals will stay vegetative and the regrowth can provide fall grazing.

3. Seed early maturing forages: On well-drained soils, crested wheatgrass will provide early season grazing and will tolerate heavy grazing. Meadow or creeping foxtail is more suitable to higher moisture throughout the year and both are very early spring grasses, but are less suited to mid- season grazing. Meadow brome and orchard grass are tame bunch grasses that are palatable with excellent regrowth and suitable for grazing. Including legumes, such as birdsfoot trefoil and alfalfa, that fix nitrogen will improve the fertility of the stand and the overall feed quality.

4. Your feed supplies need to match your livestock requirements: Take an inventory of your feed supplies every fall to make sure they match your livestock requirements. If they don't match your requirements, you can either reduce your livestock numbers or purchase more feed supplies. The sooner you adjust your forage supplies or livestock numbers, the more flexibility you'll have in your feeding program. On average, cattle consume 2.5 to three per cent of their body weight in dry matter on a daily basis. Because of the variability of winter weather, it can impact how much feed you actually use during winter feeding. It's best to re-evaluate your winter feed supplies half to three-quarters of the way through the winter.

To source or sell your feed, check out the [Manitoba Hay List](#) on Manitoba Agriculture and Resource Developments website.

For more information or help with spring grazing, visit our [livestock page](#).