



Keeping Pastures Productive Despite the Weather

by Jack Kyle, CCA-ON

It is hard to predict what the 2018 growing season will be like, but when we look at the last number of years and weather patterns around North America, there is a reasonable possibility that the summer of 2018 may be drier than normal. Keep in mind that in most years we have a dry August where many producers are looking for extra forage. The following steps should help pastures maximize effective use of available moisture.

1. Using a rotational grazing system that allows for a short grazing period and adequate time for the pasture to recover and regrow is the most important step in managing pastures for a productive season. Producers who utilize a rotational grazing system see 25-50% more production with a rotational grazing system versus a set stocking season-long grazing system.
2. Don't start too early in the spring. Let grasses grow two leaves before starting the grazing season. The first spring growth is from root reserves, so the plant needs to develop to the point that these root reserves are starting to be replaced. Grazing too early means that the second growth (following grazing) is going to draw root reserves even lower and the plant will be set back for the rest of the grazing season. It is important that the plant gets to a point where there is sufficient photosynthesis to replenish root reserves and develop new root growth.
3. Leave a minimum of 3-4 inches of residual forage. Even better, only take half of available forage at each grazing pass. The residual that is left behind reduces evaporation of soil moisture. The residue also shades the soil to keep it cool. This is particularly important for cool season grass species that prefer cool soil temperatures. Much of the residue that is left will be green plant material that will continue to photosynthesize and promote new plant growth.
4. Plan ahead and plant an annual crop – cereal grain, corn, brassicas, sorghum-sudan to graze later in the summer when perennial pastures are not growing very fast. This needs to be done early while there is still adequate soil moisture. Looking for extra forage in the middle of a drought is going to be frustrating and costly. Planning ahead to have extra forage for the month of August and early September will be a significant benefit.
5. Source hay early in the season before it becomes scarce. Buy hay, or make hay, where you might not normally think of taking the forage, and do the same for pastures. Are there sources of feed you would not normally use? Add other feeds to the ration to extend the forage supply. Supplementing with some grain early will help extend the available pasture.
6. Cull unproductive animals – open cows, old cows; these animals are consuming valuable pasture that could go to more productive animals. Wean earlier than normal. The limited good feed will support the calves and non-lactating cows have a lower feed requirement than lactating cows. The earlier you reduce numbers the more feed you will have for the retained livestock.
7. Prepare a feed budget for the season and update every two weeks during the grazing season. How much forage is available each week will also tell you how fast the forage is growing and will give you an indication of how much extra forage will be required.
8. When seeding a new pasture, include deep rooted species (alfalfa and birdsfoot trefoil are good legumes for this, orchardgrass, meadow brome and tall fescue would be grass species to consider) in the seed mix. Deep rooted species will continue to grow as the soil near the surface dries out.
9. Plan on grazing cover crops that can be planted after cereal grain harvest. Cover crops have numerous benefits for soil health and erosion control. Grazing leaves the nutrients in the field to support the soil microbes and subsequent crops.

By including these practices in your grazing management, you will have a strong healthy pasture throughout the grazing season.

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This industry driven program helps ensure that Ontario crop producers are well served by those providing their crop production advice. This article was written by one of those CCA's.