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Pasture Monitoring

One of the more important facets of livestock production is forage management. Some would even go so far as to call themselves forage managers as much as they would livestock producers! I think forage manager is a pretty accurate description – particularly as we get in to the heart of the grazing season and work at trying to manage that very important forage resource.

Our management has a lot to do with the forages available to us. Cool season grasses like brome and fescue grow very well when temperatures are in the forties through the mid-seventies. That's the reason we typically see those grasses heading here in late May and in to early June as they reach 'maturity'. Warmer season forages do well from the low seventies on in to the nineties, making them much better suited for the increasing temperatures we see in summer.

Unfortunately, we don't typically have the perfect balance of warm and cool season forages, and in some cases don't have more than one type to even think about grazing. That's what makes our management system all the more important.

In short, grasses grow leaves to capture sunlight and convert it to energy. As grass plants grow, the growing point moves from near the soil line further up the plant where it is often removed by grazing. When removed, the plant initiates regrowth from root systems and the plant starts the process over again. It works well – unless the roots haven't stockpiled enough energy to allow for recovery. If not, grass growth slows, root mass declines, and stands can thin.

To keep things in 'balance', good grass managers spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to maximize production. In short, that means grazing plants when they are actively growing, but always leaving enough foliage for recovery as well as a rest period to do so. For example, grazing a cool season pasture heavily isn't necessarily an issue, as long as three to four inches of growth is retained so that photosynthesis can start to replenish root reserves AND adequate rest is allowed for the plant to initiate recovery. If a pasture is heavily grazed, livestock can be moved to a warm season grass or other forage source to give the heavily grazed area time to recover. If they can't be moved, then grazing management has to include safeguards to keep grass from getting too short without time for recovery.

Monitor your forage resource by consistently observing grass growth through the season. Have a plan for removing animals when forages reach critical grazing levels and make sure that pastures receive adequate rest for ample recovery before they are grazed again or prior to fall or winter dormancy. Make sure you are grazing cool season species in the appropriate time frame and warm seasons in the best time frame to maximize their production. If you want to get even more technical, start taking pasture measurements. A ruler or grazing stick and production data for specific forage species, combined with appropriate grazing height suggestions can give you a really good idea about how much grazing you can expect from an area. All of these tools can help you not only manage the forage resource for the current season, but help you maintain stands in to the future!