

Managing Your Pastures When It Rains

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After several years of dry springs and sporadic moisture, many Virginia cattlemen have enjoyed "normal" or better rainfall during the spring months. As compared to past years, it appears that having enough grass is not a concern. However, it is during these periods that cattlemen have the opportunity to heal and nurture their forage stands and be prepared for the next dry spell. Many cattlemen have used some type of grazing management during past droughts in an effort to provide as much forage growth and stretch their forage supply as much as possible. It will be that same attention to forage management and growth that can heal pastures during better conditions.

During dry conditions some type of pasture rotation is effective in providing a rest period for forages which increased their persistence and limited productivity. By employing a rotation of pastures during periods of ample or better moisture many positive items can also be accomplished.

Rotation of pastures can be as simple as 3-4 pastures or as many 12+ paddocks. The greater number of divisions will allow more grazing management and shorter periods of grazing of each pasture division. Simple single strands of temporary electric fence can be effective and economical in dividing pastures. Availability of water is typically the most limiting factor.

If you have not rotationally grazed your pastures before, start small and rotate among existing pasture divisions or create a few paddocks, rather than be put off by creating a paddock system. Additional divisions can be added later.

Management of standing residue- while recently having too much forage has not been an issue, plentiful moisture and desirable temperatures can produce more forage than can be consumed. Rotating through available pastures will allow for removal of top growth with ample forage left for regrowth. This type of grazing management will reduce animal selectivity (spot grazing) and allow more sunlight through the grass canopy for legumes. Remember to move faster during periods of rapid growth and slower during the hotter, dryer weather

By insuring some degree of rest after grazing, forage stands have the opportunity to build root energy reserves. This benefits all forages, but the legumes and grasses which are more sensitive to overgrazing (orchardgrass, clovers and native species) will respond to a greater extent.

If the grass is thinning out, let pastures grow to 8-12 inches before grazing or harvest as hay. Avoid overgrazing and undergrazing during late summer and fall.

Although fertilizer and lime costs are additional cash costs, do not hesitate to make strategic investments in these if soil test and stand persistence suggest a need. Legumes will respond to improvements in soil pH and grasses will respond to small additions of N.

One of the most noticeable and repeatable results of establishing a pasture rotation is increased forage productivity (pounds of forage dry matter/acre) above continuous grazing. Rather than trying to increase stocking rate to stay up with forage growth, focus on extending your grazing season and minimize winter hay feeding.

Many times (not all) what was judged to a poor forage stand can be restored by the combination of favorable weather conditions, periods of rest and patience. Patience and discipline are both important ingredients in restoring pasture health.

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