

# Grazing Bites

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As I write this I gaze out my office window across fields that are more a kin to something I would visualize somewhere western; strikingly contrasting colors of clear blue skies, green from trees, and straw brown grass. Things look pretty bleak for the time period, but as my dear Mother often says and her Mother before her, “this too will pass”. It just may not quite as quickly as we would hope. Last week’s drought report put the majority of Indiana in either the severe or extreme drought category. If you happen to not fall into these categories, consider yourself very blessed.



What to do? I’ve been hearing a lot of that lately. Answers become increasingly limited as the days continue to add up with no measureable rainfall. The first thing to do I believe is to take inventory. Inventory all your grazing livestock and assume at least three percent dry matter needs per body weight per day. Next walk your pastures noting any potential grazing or the lack of and estimate the amount of available dry matter present per acre. For a rough estimate, figure 250 pounds of dry matter per average acre inch present. Ideally, try and leave some forage behind. We don’t want to kill the grass completely. Most is only dormant and should potentially come back once rain returns and dormancy is broken. Grazing or haying too close under extremely dry and hot conditions increasingly raises the chance of losing the stand.

Remember what I said about soil temperature last month, we really need to try and keep soil temperatures lower if at all possible and our forages and soil will appreciate it and do their best to pay us dividends once moisture is adequate. I’m seeing soil temperatures in the high nineties in overgrazed ground and close to 100 in some cases. But...I’m also finding that sites where good cover has still been maintained some soil temperatures still in the mid seventies which even marvels me.

Well, back to the subject at hand. Next inventory any hay that you have on hand. Based on your calculations, how long can you maintain the number of livestock you have with what you presently have? Some of...well all of that hay was supposed to have been for this coming winter. If you want to be the optimist, figure roughly into the equation some fall regrowth, but be conservative, you can’t bank on it yet. Where are you at? It is now decision time.

I’ve had people scuff at some recommended carrying capacities and declare that their ground is capable of handling more cattle or whatever they are raising than that. Have to be careful not to figure carrying capacity on a “good” year. I have said several times that it is better to have too much grass than to not have enough. In that case, figuring carrying capacity is best done based on the average production of forage or even more conservingly slightly below average. If your livestock consist of only maintenance type animals (brood cows, ewes, nannies, etc) that are present year around and you find yourself short in your

figuring of dry matter, then you should be looking close at the herd and deciding what could be or should be culled to reduce numbers. Thin cows that will take more supplementation to get in proper condition prior to winter, cows that missed cycles and calved later than the rest, poor attitude, and poor performers should be considered to be culled along with any other reason you can come up with to reduce numbers if needed. The earlier that you realize this, the better off you will be. It is too late for a contingency plan; it is decision time.

If you are also running stockers, raising heifers, or have another species, then you have more options. Reducing or eliminating one of those classes for a time being might be a really good decision. Diversification in this case means more flexibility and options especially when you are talking about short timers on the farm...and I'm talking animals not people!

Supplementation should be utilized to maintain the animals during this period and it should be cost efficient if possible. Supplementing should be minimal to be feasible; years of profit can disappear quickly trying to feed through a drought. Reducing numbers might be the best option. Reducing numbers does not have to mean selling out. It really means taking them off your pastures and bale rings. Perhaps consider finding other places to graze if possible; there are other options, weigh them all out. There may be opportunities with drought stricken crops, just be certain to test for nitrates. At this point in time, if a field can be grazed, you are probably better off grazing it rather than cutting it for hay...where do you think it is going? It is already standing hay. Drought stressed forage can be more nutrient dense than normal – utilize it wisely and continue to rotate pastures. Grazing livestock are skillful in seeking out and sorting through what is available and will meet their needs if possible. Moving them often better allows them to continue to do this and not making them settle on lesser quality.

Watch for possible poisonous plant issues as livestock graze areas with low available forage. Poison hemlock and white snake root become increasingly more likely to be eaten as hungry livestock search for “something green”. Monitor pastures for poisonous plants and available forage. Contact your local extension office for assistance on identifying poisonous plants.

A while back I was walking down the main street in Gatlinburg following an older couple and a store clerk that was trying to draw in customers was heckling people as they walked by. He asked the elderly man, “Are you happy or married?” The old guy hesitated for a second and with a jab in the ribs said “both”. “Good answer” was quickly quirked by the wife. The same question might be asked of us today; “Are you happy or farming?” I hope you can still say, “Both”. In farming and especially in grazing, as in a marriage, some days are more challenging than others. The reward for accepting and enduring the challenge is a stronger attachment to the cause and a thing called experience.

Hope an article on drought helps it rain. Hang in there, pray for rain, and keep on grazing!

**Mark your Calendar!**

**NE Indiana Pasture Walks** - Pasture walks in the NE corner of Indiana the 2nd Thursday of each month from 1 PM till 3 to 4 or until done. Contact LaGrange County SWCD (260)463-5200 x3 for more information

**Purdue Forage Management Workshop** –September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012 - Purdue Agronomy Farm – Go to <http://www3.ag.purdue.edu/agry/dtc/Pages/september6.aspx> for more information.

**Purdue Grazing School 102** –September 14-15, 2012 at SIPAC – Contact Margie Zoglmann 812-547-7084 or [mzoglman@purdue.edu](mailto:mzoglman@purdue.edu) for more information.

**5<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Grazing Lands** – December 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012, Orlando, Florida. For more information, go to <http://www.glci.org/5NCGL.html> A few featured speakers will be Temple Grandin, Fred Provenza and Kit Pharo.

**Indiana Grazing Conferences** – Southern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013; Northern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 1-2, 2013. More information coming.