



FACT SHEET 5.2

GRAZING AND GRASS MANAGEMENT

Many hobby farmers see themselves as “grass farmers” when approaching grass and grazing management. It is important to manage pasture grass and grazing activities to meet the nutritional needs of your foraging animals while maintaining pasture health for long-term viability.

Maintaining proper grass height and resting pastures long enough for grass regrowth contribute to a healthy and lush pasture. Paying particular attention to grass height and grass regrowth, using techniques such as rotational grazing, can ensure a well vegetated pasture and can help keep soil stabilized, reduce soil erosion and protect nearby surface water quality.

GRASS GROWTH

Proper grass growth and care can provide a sustainable source of forage for your hobby farm livestock. Unlike most trees and shrubs that grow from the outer tip of their branches, grass generally grows from the crown, or base of the plant. If grass is grazed too close of the ground, its roots lose the ability to store energy, the crown can be permanently damaged and grass may not regrow. Remember that you need grass to make grass.



Adapted from Managing Small Acreage Pastures During and After Drought. Natural Resources Series, Fact Sheet No. 6.112, Colorado State University, December 2014. Comprehensive Environmental, Inc. © 2017

GRAZING HEIGHT

Optimal grazing height will vary based on the type of grass and how selective the grazer, but in general, pasture vegetation should be grazed at a height of 6 to 8 inches and stopped at a height of around 3 to 4 inches. This can be thought of as ‘take half the grass height and leave half the grass height’ concept. Although this can be difficult with grazers that are selective, grasses grazed down to the crown can decimate a pasture leaving little grass for regrowth.

DID YOU KNOW?

Many farm animals eat approximately 2% to 3% of their body weight every day. This means that a 1,000-pound cow or horse could eat as much as 30 pounds of food or more every day.

MOWING

Selective grazers will consume their preferred grass while leaving others. Periodically mowing your pasture as needed to a height of 6 to 8 inches will help maintain vegetative growth. Mowing can help thwart weed growth by preventing weeds from going to seed.

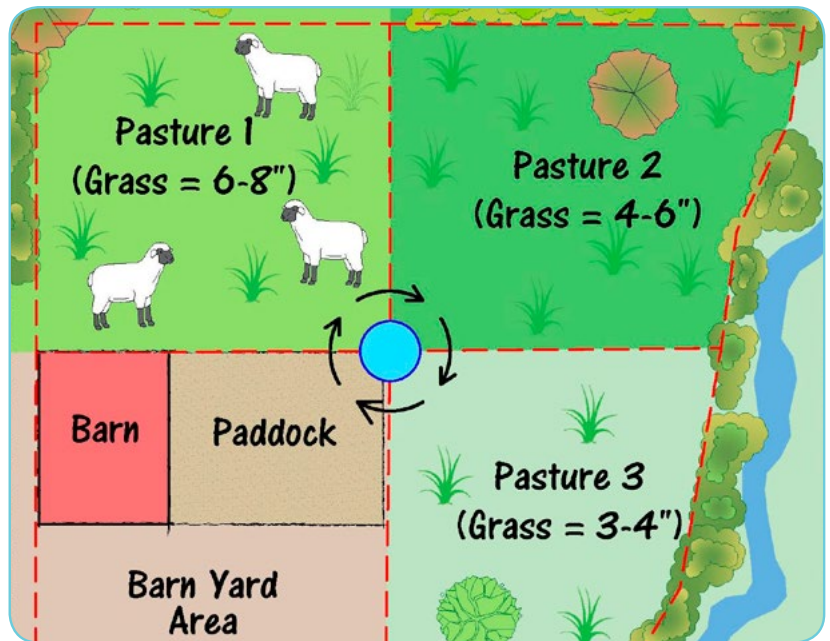
OVERGRAZING

Overgrazed pastures most often occur when they are overstocked (too many animals are being supported by too little land) and pastures are not given the rest period needed for grasses to properly regrow. The quantity and quality of poor grass regrowth will not meet the nutritional needs of the animal. Grass that is consistently grazed too low will eventually die, causing bare spots. The heavy hoofs of horses and livestock on these unvegetated areas will lead to soil compaction and erosion. Consider rotational grazing practices that give pastures a rest period between grazing.

ROTATIONAL GRAZING

Rotational grazing or pasture rotation is when animals are rotated through several pastures or segregated areas rather than being allowed to continuously graze on one large pasture. Dividing your pasture into two or more smaller pastures gives you better control over how long your animals forage each area.

Start them in a pasture that has a grass height of 6-8 inches. When that height is reduced to 3-4 inches, rotate them into another pasture. Depending on the season, amount of rain, and number of animals you need to support, the grass in your starting pasture may or may not be at grazing height (6-8") when you complete the rotation. If not, then animals should be fed supplemental feed and kept in alternative areas (paddock, livestock yard, exercise area) until pasture grass has grown to an appropriate height to begin grazing again.



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Periodically inspect your hobby farm pasture(s). Look for bare areas that need seeding, weed species (and those that might be poisonous) that should be removed and erodible areas that could be addressed with stormwater management techniques (see Section 6).

WATER QUALITY BENEFIT

Good grazing and grass management practices not only help sustain strong pastures to support healthy animals but will help to maintain a solid vegetative cover. This cover can help minimize soil erosion and runoff while acting as a filter to help keep nutrients onsite and slow pollutants from reaching nearby waterways, and protecting water quality.