

Managing Pastures for Grazing Animals

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After the long months of winter, confined to the barn, eating expensive purchased feed, our grazing livestock are eager to get out on pasture. We are eager to see them eating feed we don't have to purchase and we hope to make the grass last until it is time to put the animals back on winter rations, baled hay purchased at 5 or more dollars a bale and grain from the feed store; that can really get expensive! Whether you're feeding cattle, sheep, goats or horses, are you getting the most from your pasture?



Good pasture management involves managing your soil fertility, sizing paddocks for maximum use of available forage, managing the pasture grasses and legumes to optimize nutrition while not overgrazing, and maintaining the right number of animals for the amount and type of land you have.

Steps for good pasture management;

1. Manage soil fertility; pasture grasses prefer a soil pH of 6.0-6.5, New Hampshire soils are naturally acidic and may have a natural pH as low as 4.5. The naturally acidic conditions of New Hampshire soils can be adjusted using lime and wood ash, but over time soils will return to their natural state. Soil pH is important because nutrients necessary for grass growth will not be available to the plant roots if the pH is low or too high. The best way to determine the pH and nutrient needs for grass growth is to do a soil test. Soil test forms are available on line at the UNH Cooperative Extension web site: <http://extension.unh.edu/Agric/AGPDTS/SoilTest.htm> or by contacting the Carroll County Cooperative Extension office at 447-3834.
2. Paddock size should be determined by the number of animals, the amount of feed they need and the amount of feed available. Size paddocks so that animals are moved to a new paddock every 3-7 days. Grazing animals that require more nutrients; growing animals, lactating females and males during the breeding season can be moved more often, giving them access to the most nutritious, most digestible grasses. In a managed grazing setting, never leave animals in the same paddock for more than 7 days as they will over graze some plants and under graze others leading to weed and overgrown grass issues.
3. Graze pastures when grass averages 6-8 inches tall and remove livestock when the grass averages 3-4 inches tall.
4. Provide a sacrifice area for those times when grass is not recovering quickly enough or when the ground is saturated and the hooves of the livestock will cause damage to the turf.

Depending on the type and fertility of your soil, the forages present and the weather conditions in a given grazing season, it will take 1-2 acres of pasture to feed each animal unit. An animal unit is 1000 pounds of animal weight. For example a 1000 pound cow is 1 animal unit. Depending on the amount of work or production expected from your livestock they will need 2-3% of their body weight each day in feed dry matter to meet their nutritional needs. Since lush growing pasture is about 20% dry matter each animal unit will need around 100 pounds of fresh grass per day.

For more information on pasture management contact Tina Savage, UNH Cooperative Extension office at 447-3834, or by email at tina.savage@unh.edu.

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