

Pasture Evaluation: 5 Things to Assess

The past year brought drought in some areas and floods in others. Cold open weather following unseasonably warm temperatures is further challenge stands this winter. What should pasture managers evaluate to ensure adequate productivity in the coming grazing season? Here are 5 things to assess in your pasture: **stand thickness, plant and root health, soil fertility, stand composition, and productive area.**

Stand thickness- Winter is an excellent time to count the plants per square foot in your pasture or at least visually note the amount of space between them. Open space gives opportunity for weeds, allows greater moisture loss in summer and limits productivity by



allowing individual plants to become lazy, stretching out horizontally rather than reaching vertically to compete for sunlight. Lazy plants are more susceptible to over-grazing, tend not to maintain digestibility and allow livestock to trample more forage. If you can see space between the plants in your pasture, consider overseeding with clovers or pasture mix at a prorated rate.

Plant and root health- Turf professionals obsess about insects and diseases that damage lawns and golf courses during the winter. Guess what? The same pests are at work in your pasture! Drive or walk over the pasture looking down to find brown areas or parts of plants that are brown. Dig a few plants in these areas.

White roots are healthy. Brown ones are not. Often the 'brown' side of the plant will have noticeably fewer healthy roots due to grub feeding. You may also notice holes in the crown or lower stem of damaged plants. You may also find areas (often roughly circular shaped) where all the grass is white or pinkish. These are likely one of the various leaf-diseases that proliferate during cool wet weather. In spring, if you look horizontally across the field, you will probably overlook the damage because it will look green. Only later when the pasture doesn't recover as quickly as it should will



you wonder why and probably blame it on the weather. We recommend including beneficial microorganisms in our fall and spring green-up Bio-Enhanced Pasture programs. These organisms stimulate an immune response in the plant as well as crowd out pests in and around the roots and stems reducing damage.

Soil fertility- If you haven't sampled for a few years, it may be appropriate to do so now; although during the growing season is better. If you have reports sitting in a file, winter is a great time to review them. Available calcium and potassium, phosphorous, and minor element



levels should be discussed with your local FSM dealer to build a Bio-Enhanced program that will set your pasture up for a productive season and may include lime, gypsum or manure which can often be applied during the winter.

Stand composition- While looking at stand thickness, stand composition should also be assessed. A proper balance for productivity and animal health in terms of plants per square foot is between 2:1 and 3:1 of cool-season grasses to legumes such as white clover, red clover and alfalfa. While the weather during the grazing season and your management may favor one over the other, maintaining this ratio should allow a return to balance with a little rain and better management. Clover is the easiest and least expensive upgrade to a pasture, if lacking. Grasses can be added but often require a drill to get good seed to soil contact.

Productive area- If you overlaid an ariel photo of your pasture over satellite image of the boundaries, how much area is not productive? Overgrown fence rows, excessive tree branches along wooded areas, perennial weeds and heavy traffic areas can all reduce the productive area of a pasture. Consider how many more animals could your pasture carry or how much less hay you would need to buy, if the pasture was fully productive.



In summary, evaluating and addressing 'weaknesses' in a pasture system during the 'off-season' can put managers in the strongest position possible to maximize it's productivity in the coming seasons.

Be sure to visit with Kevin Fowler or your local FSM Dealer to discuss solutions to any of these issues you may need to address.

Contact your local FSM Dealer

for additional information on the Products listed above.

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