

Do your horses, livestock, and other animals eat their broccoli, or do they just eat the ice cream?

What the heck does this have to do with grazing management?

If landowners have a few animals and a few acres, they are grazing managers charged with the health of their property. Is a goal for a property to be healthy and productive or a weed patch with large areas of exposed soil lost to wind and water erosion each year?

Most landowners want property that is healthy, beautiful, and productive and also provides a quality



This is an example of a badly overgrazed area. This horse needs to be in a corral and this pasture reseeded and not grazed for one to two years.

source of feed for their grazing animals. Here are a few simple principles that, if followed, will help maintain or restore property to a healthy and productive state.

'Tis the Season

Repeatedly grazing grasses and forbs at the critical time year after year will severely damage or kill those grasses and forbs. Plants in the Rocky Mountain region have a short season to complete their reproductive processes. The combination of available moisture and cooler temperatures are required for cool-season grasses – the dominant and most productive grasses – to grow and

produce seed. Since the most dependable moisture is received in the spring months, the grasses have evolved to take advantage of early season moisture and complete their life cycle fairly early in the summer; however, when grasses are trying to complete that cycle, they are very susceptible to grazing. Repeated grazing during that critical window will severely damage or kill the grass plant, opening a patch of soil to weeds and other undesirable plants.

If there is not enough acreage to support livestock year-round, consider removing grazing pressure during this critical window to allow grasses time to produce seed and restore energy reserves in their roots they use to survive Wyoming's long, cold, windy, and generally dry winters.

When is this critical window? Depending upon elevation and seasonal temperatures, the critical window can begin as early as late March and usually ends early to mid-June. When the majority of cool-season grasses have produced a seed head and the seed head can be seen blowing in the wind (elongation has completed), the critical window is over and grazing will be far less detrimental.

It is important to delay turning out livestock to graze until mid-summer! The stored hay will have to last longer, but your pasture will thank you. If lucky enough to have sufficient acreage to sup-



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Grazing management is making sure your animals



port animals year-round, be sure not to graze the same place in subsequent years during this critical window.

Leave Some for the Soil Gods

The old timers say “graze half, leave half.” It isn’t quite that simple, but they understood the concept. Don’t graze every blade of grass down to the dirt. A key component of the factory that produces grass on land is the soil. If some “residual” forage is not left to protect the soil during the winter, the factory’s ability to produce forage long into the future will be severely hampered. When livestock have grazed the pasture to a level where they are starting to consume plants trying to regrow, it is time to remove the animals from that pasture.

It is best each grass plant receives no more than one defoliation (grazing or some other type) per season, unless there is irrigation water available or it is an exceptionally wet year and the plants recover substantially.

This rule is even more important if the grazing happens during the critical window described earlier. Even though one might think he or she is wasting usable forage by not grazing every bit, think of it as an investment in future productive potential of the pasture.

Making Them Eat Their Broccoli

Think of it this way: If one football player walks up to the buffet at a local cafeteria and no



This is an example of selective grazing. This horse is avoiding the taller grasses and regrowing plants that have already been grazed this season. This pasture needs to be smaller to decrease selective grazing.

one else is around, he will take his time filling his plate with exactly what he wants to eat. Conversely, if the entire football team is given just a few boxes of pizza, players will grab whatever they can, knowing if they don’t act fast, they will get nothing.

To get livestock to select the least desirable plants in addition to more desirable ones, grazing has to be concentrated to smaller areas. Concentration is usually accomplished by dividing pastures into smaller units and/or grouping livestock into larger groups, then reducing the amount of time any one pasture is used.

This allows pastures to have a rest and recovery period after being grazed, permitting grasses to regrow if moisture levels and temperatures are right, or reducing the number of plants that are grazed during their

ICE CREAM

eat their vegetables along with their sweets



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critical window. When given the opportunity, most grazing animals will select the most palatable (tasty) and nutrient-dense plants – the ice cream – and graze those plants repeatedly, leaving the less palatable plants – the broccoli – for last. This simple principle is one underlying cause of many over-grazed properties and the reason that, when grazing animals are given free reign of the property, the most desirable plants are grazed to extinction while the least desirable plants (often weeds) proliferate and eventually dominate.

The photo of the horse on page 21 shows a pasture full of green, high-quality feed, but notice where the horse has chosen to graze. It is not eating the tall Garrison grass in the foreground but is grazing smaller regrowth grass plants. Those plants are likely to eventually die from the continuous grazing pressure, and weeds will take their place while the taller grass does not get grazed.

Start watching livestock graze and see what plants they select. You will start to appreciate the power of plant selection. If some plants are being grazed more heavily than others and a property owner wants to leave the livestock out longer so they start using those plants that have not been grazed, that is a sign to decrease animal selection by increasing concentration and shortening the grazing period.

Managing grazing on your land is your responsibility. Remember the reasons you purchased the land and the reason you enjoy country living. A properly managed pasture will produce more forage and raise healthier livestock than an overgrazed weed patch. Remember the **Season, the Soil Gods, and the Broccoli** as you plan and implement a grazing program.

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