

UPSIDE DOWN DOWN GRAZING REVERSE THE SEASONS



This unusual grazing regimen may increase forage performance

By Barton Stam

We are used to a system in which horses graze during the spring/early summer and then are fed hay the rest of the year.

I'm going to suggest flipping that around – feed hay during the spring while keeping animals out of the pastures and then allowing them to graze during the dormant season.

Horse owners who own or manage pastures often struggle balancing their horses' nutritional needs and keeping pastures healthy.

Small acreages and multiple horses can make this balancing act even more challenging. Pasture owners in Wyoming and other dry states must frequently deal with low annual precipitation, limited irrigation, and soils that may not be ideal for growing quality forages.



Since many pastures will not supply enough forage to provide adequate nutrition year-round for the horses on the properties, this forces

horse owners to purchase and feed hay. The horses' diet throughout the year is then a mix of grazing plants grown on the property and hay.

This method can provide a healthy diet for horses, but pastures still get overgrazed. Whether trying to avoid the costs in money, the time, and the labor of purchasing and feeding hay, owners trying to stretch the grazing season end up causing the quantity and quality of forage to suffer. However, lengthening the grazing season can be an effective management strategy if done correctly and at the right time.

Traditional Grazing, Feeding

A typical grazing/feeding regime on a small acreage consists of feeding horses hay during the winter and then, as the grass greens up in the spring, allowing the horses to graze



with little or no hay. Depending on the productivity of the property and the number of horses, the forage supply runs out sometime in the summer/fall, and hay is again fed. Often, horses still have access to the pasture and continue to graze any residual grass.

Boot Stage Sensitive

Where this system runs into trouble is the health of the forages. Springtime is the most sensitive time of year for grazing grasses, especially during the boot stage when the seed head is being elevated up through the stem. When grasses are continually grazed during this period, their opportunity to grow, reproduce, and compete against invasive species is severely reduced. This gives the competitive advantage to less desirable species (such as weeds), and desirable species may be crowded out. If this continues, pasture productivity continues to decline requiring more hay to be fed.

Barton Stam is always studying how rangeland can be more productive and reduce costs for landowners. He is the University of Wyoming Extension educator based in Hot Springs County and serving northwest Wyoming. He can be reached at (307) 864-3421 or at brstam@uwyo.edu.

This is where the title of this article begins to make sense.

Full Production Cycle before Grazing

The advantage to grazing in autumn/winter is that desirable grasses can go through their full reproduction cycle every spring. This allows plants to grow the most forage possible, set seed, and compete against invasive and undesirable species.

Animal nutrition and body conditions should be monitored during the fall grazing season. Forage species and supply, animal age and type, and weather dictate how long animals can graze dormant forages and remain healthy.

Healthy, full-grown horses, especially those not being used hard every day, often do very well on dormant forages. You may need to resume feeding hay during the dormant season depending on how long your forage supply lasts.

Consider Pasture Differences

Each property is different so grazing plans should take differences into account.

- Those with high-production pastures and adequate irrigation can often do well using intensive grazing strategies.
- Larger properties with only one or two horses may allow grazing throughout the dormant season with no additional feeding.
- If snow reaches depths that prevent horses from reaching the grass, supplemental feeding will be necessary.
- Electric fencing might be used to even out grazing in the pasture if horses overuse portions.
- If the forage supply for grazing is severely limited, hay might be fed most of the year and access allowed to the pasture only when you are on vacation and not around to feed hay.

Consider upside down grazing.

Some adjustment of your current grazing management plan may increase the performance of pastures while still providing animals a healthy diet.