

TO SEED OR NOT TO SEED?

Ask three questions before expending the time and effort to seed pasture

By Blaine Horn

Grass running out? The summer is half over and your pasture may appear low on grass for your horses or other grazing livestock.

If this sounds familiar, you may be considering whether to seed the pasture this fall or next spring with native or introduced dryland pasture grasses.

In Wyoming, grass seeding can be costly and risky due to the climate.

Unless a pasture has been continually overgrazed year after year, especially during the growing season, there are probably numerous desirable grasses present waiting for a chance to grow to their full potential.

Given this chance, they will produce more forage and start to fill bare areas, helping reduce erosion and other ills. What if Mother Nature needs a boost?

The Three Questions

Ask three questions before deciding to reseed: 1) Is seeding needed or is there something else that can be done? 2) Am I prepared to forego use of the pasture for an extended period of time while the grass gets established? and 3) Am I willing to practice good grazing management practices afterward?

Although a pasture appears to need seeding, what may be needed is rest from grazing during the growing season. Plenty of desirable grass plants may be in the pasture and, if given the opportunity to grow, would produce as much forage as is



Resting a pasture provides grasses the opportunity to grow to their full potential.

possible for the climate. If so, seeding would be a waste of time and money since the new, young plants with small root systems could not compete with the established grasses for soil and water.

Rest is the Test

The best way to determine if there are sufficient desirable grasses is to rest the pasture from grazing for at least the first half of the next growing season, that is, from spring until at least mid-July in most areas of the state.

Given sufficient precipitation, resting provides existing grasses an opportunity to grow and show their potential. Determine then if there are sufficient desirable grasses or if re-seeding is needed.

The pasture's soil texture (sandy, loamy, clayey) and the average amount of mid- to late-spring

precipitation will determine how many grass plants are sufficient. There may appear to be too much bare soil between grass plants, but this may be appropriate for the soil type and the amount of precipitation the area receives. A University of Wyoming Extension educator or Natural Resources Conservation Service rangeland management specialist can help determine if there are sufficient grass plants.

If resting the entire pasture is not feasible, rest a portion by fencing it with electric fence tape. The corners may work well for this, and the total fenced off area should probably be at least 10 percent the size of the pasture. Another option is to put a few enclosure pens (a fenced-in area where livestock can't graze) in the pasture. Livestock wire panels work well and should provide a large

enough area (16-foot x 16-foot) to determine if there are any desirable grass plants left in the pasture and at what density.

The number of exclosures needed depends on the size of the pasture. An exclosure for every 5 to 10 acres of pasture should be sufficient. However, cost of the wire panels and T-posts could make this option cost prohibitive compared to the expense of electric fence tape and posts.

No Grazing First Season, Limited in Second

If a seeding is needed, be prepared not to graze for the first growing season and to limit the amount of grazing the second. Newly seeded grasses need time to establish root systems before being grazed.

The pasture can be grazed once the grasses go dormant for the winter the first season but do not graze the second season until after the plants have gone to seed (early to mid-July in most areas of the state). Another pasture would be needed or livestock should be kept in a corral the first growing season and half the second. If seeding is required, the amount of hay needed to feed corralled animals is probably not much more than allowing the animals to graze the poor pasture and supplemental feeding with hay.

A variable with big impact is precipitation. Establishing seeded grasses is dependent upon adequate moisture throughout the growing season. Seeded grasses may take two or more years to establish. There may be enough spring moisture for seed

germination but not enough summer moisture to keep the plants growing. After two or three years of these conditions, all the planted seed will be dead.

Change Grazing Management

The property owner should be committed to changing grazing management after grasses become established. There is no point in investing the time and money in seeding a pasture unless good grazing management is practiced afterward. If the reason for seeding the pasture was due to overgrazing, reducing the stocking rates and rotating grazing periods is needed if the goal is to have a productive pasture into the foreseeable future. Good grazing management balances the amount of available forage the land can supply

to the needs of the grazing animals and consists of three principles: 1) less intense grazing so there is some green leaf material left on the plant that it can use to create food for itself; 2) grasses are left ungrazed during a portion of the growing season so they can replenish their roots; and 3) grasses in a pasture are not grazed in the same growth stage every year.

The last two principles infer some type of grazing rotation is practiced.

Property owners may find that following these principles is all that is needed to improve a poor pasture.

For more information, contact a local University of Wyoming Extension or Natural Resources Conservation Service office, or visit barnyardsandbackyards.com to view articles and videos on how to implement good grazing practices.



Property owners may find implementing some type of grazing management is the only requirement for rejuvenating depleted pastures.

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