

Recognizing overgrazing — How do I know

By Dallas Mount

What is overgrazing? Overgrazing is a function of revisits to a plant (length of time in a pasture) and intensity of grazing (how much growth is removed), and it is modified by the stage of growth during which the grazing occurs.

Study these pictures.



The left side has been grazed lightly, allowing residual forage to accumulate, while the right side has been used heavily during the spring and summer causing grass plants to die, bare ground to increase, and soil to become exposed. Which side would be more prone to soil erosion by wind? Which side would have soil erosion during a high-intensity thunderstorm? Which side would hold more snow (and ultimately more moisture) during a storm? Which side will grow more forage during the upcoming growing season?



Grazing during the spring is especially detrimental to grasses. Just as these grasses start to grow, the grazing animals are there to nip them off causing grasses to eventually die and leaving bare ground for weeds to invade. Delay grazing until after seed set, or rotate spring grazing to a different pasture each year.



The above two pictures demonstrate differences in potential productivity due to grazing practices. These pictures were taken approximately 20 feet apart. Picture 4 is an area that has been managed properly, and the grasses

when my animals have grazed too much?



When small rocks or cactus are the tallest things in a pasture, you have a problem! This pasture has been heavily used for many years. The grass plants have lots of bare ground between them, and there is little to no evidence of residual forage from the previous growing season. This pasture needs to be completely rested for one to two years.



Although some tall grass still remains, this pasture has been overgrazed. The grazing animals have selected the most lush, younger vegetation, leaving behind the taller, more mature plants. This results in some plants getting grazed several times and others not at all. Eventually, the plants that get grazed multiple times will likely die, and bare ground and weeds will take their place. This pasture should be grazed for a shorter time period after midsummer to allow the stressed plants a full growing season recovery. The grazing period should only be long enough that animals graze each plant only once. This picture illustrates a situation where rotation might be the easy solution. In all the other “bad” photos, there is an apparent problem with the balance of productive capacity, length of time grazing and/or animal numbers – generally only solved by running fewer animals and/or adding more ground coupled with careful management.



are healthy and productive. This area was grazed previously but had been rested the previous growing season. Picture 3 is across the fence from picture 4 in an area repeatedly grazed heavily during spring and summer.

Dallas Mount is a University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service educator serving Goshen, Laramie, and Platte counties. He can be reached at (307) 322-3667 or dmount@uwyo.edu.