



## **Forage Management for Sheep**

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One of the management practices that all livestock/forage producers need to focus on is Forage Management. For sheep producers the first thing they need to do is to set annual goals for their forage and pasture grazing system.

Under most farm circumstances a forage grazing plan will require several years to implement selected goals. One of these goals should be to use as much forage as practical to meet the nutritional needs of the sheep. This will help to reduce the costs for purchased and stored feeds. Grazers should try to optimize pasture yield, quality and persistence of the forage and this can be done with the development of a managed grazing program.

Managed grazing allows shepherds to use a higher stocking density that requires fewer acres. This would permit either additional sheep numbers or increased grazing days for the operation. A series of smaller paddocks are used to rotate animals, which allows for a forage rest period. Rest periods of 30 days are necessary to maintain legumes in the stand. Sheep are moved more frequently among the paddocks based upon forage quality, quantity and their nutritional needs. The grazing period in each paddock should be short. This reduces spot grazing and re-grazing palatable plants. Good quality pasture increases the grazing or harvest efficiency of forage. Continuous grazing may only capture 25 to 30 percent of the available forage. Managed grazing may more than double the forage utilized by the sheep.

Animals should be moved to the next paddock when 3 to 4 inches of forage stubble remain for photosynthesis (plant growth) and to prevent overgrazing. Managed grazing means closer contact with the sheep and better flock management. Managed grazing can be a sustainable, size-neutral technology that can be used if you have five ewes or 500 in the flock.

When forage growth exceeds the needs of the flock consider harvesting a percent of the paddocks for first- cutting hay for feeding during winter. This will keep forages more vegetative (higher quality) and these paddocks can be brought into the grazing rotation later in the season when there is a natural slump of forage production and they have recovered.

Each day sheep graze and harvest forages, they require less purchased feed and hay.

If you are looking at extending the grazing season you might want to consider using crop residues, annual forages, brassica crops (turnips, rape and kale) and/or stockpiled cool-season forages to maximize grazing days.

When it comes to a managed forage system for sheep some of the key factors that you need to consider are:

**Fencing-** this is necessary for animal control and makes a managed grazing system work. When planned right it enables producers to move sheep easily from one paddock to another with a minimal amount of effort or time. It allows for access of harvesting equipment to maximize forage quality during times of excess forage production- usually early in the growing season. There are a couple of drawbacks to a rotational grazing system; these include the initial investment in fences and watering systems as well as the improved management skills required by the operator to make the system work.

**Problem weeds-** control should be executed as an early goal to reduce competition with grazing plants and before adding legumes or grasses to the pasture mix. Control could be mechanical, chemical or a combination, depending upon the type of weed or brush.

**Fertility-** Don't let soil fertility limit your pasture productivity. Test to determine the pH, P and K available for plant growth. Pastures with adequate legumes like alfalfa or clovers in the mix can supply the nitrogen needed for the grasses.

Setting up a managed grazing system for your sheep operation can be a challenge. It can start with a simple cross fence that divides a pasture into 2 or 4 paddocks that allows sheep to be moved out of one area so that the forages have a chance to recover and prevents or reduces selective grazing. Following some of the basic rotational practices allows the grass producer to work smarter – not harder – and limits forage waste.

Adapted from Make pasture and forages work for sheep