



Managing Pastures after Drought

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Grazing season is just around the corner and with pastures recovering from extensive drought in 2021, there may be some consideration as to when and how cattle should be turned out on pasture this spring. How pastures were managed in 2021 and temperatures this spring will influence the rates grasses grow and pasture readiness.

Under normal conditions pasture managers know to make sure forage is ready to be grazed before livestock are turned out. Livestock grazing on pasture too early cause reduced plant leaf area for photosynthesis, reducing the ability of pasture grasses to replace carbohydrates. This then leads to decreased plant vigor, thin stands and lower forage production.

Monitoring the grazing readiness of your pastures before turning out livestock is vital. If done correctly, plants are more tolerant of stressors due to grazing and weather, and will maintain a higher vigor to continue forage production for the following years.

Moisture availability plays a large role in managing range and pasturelands.

Rains late fall 2021 saw pastures green up and things looked the best they had all year. Even with this fall moisture, did pastures recover enough to handle this coming grazing season?

This depends on the management decisions from the fall. If a pasture was used heavily, the tiller of cool-season grasses may have been removed. Cool-season grasses start growth from tillers that develop in the fall. If these tillers were eaten or died due to drought, then the plant will need to develop new tillers in April and May, delaying growth. If pastures had two years of heavy usage that stressed those plants, they're going to be impacted in terms of plant development and growth.

The spring of 2022 looks promising from a moisture standpoint. Record snowfall throughout the winter has the potential to recharge soil moisture levels. The amount will be dependent on how we transition into spring. Ideally we are looking to a slow warm-up that will allow moisture to seep into the soil rather than run-off. Too slow of a warming trend in late March and early April may not see enough of a melt and as we approach the typically warmer weather in late April and early May if enough snow hasn't melted previously we may see a very quick melt of the remaining snow cover leading to more moisture running off than staying on the land.

One of the downsides to a slow spring is that the longer winter is extended, the longer it will be until cattle can get on grass. Many producers have very tight forage inventories and will be looking to put cattle on grass as quickly as possible this spring.

If this is the case on your operation, to help protect and promote your pastures so that you have enough forage through the grazing season, you may have to consider sacrificing a pasture or paddock, or plant some annual forage to provide relief while pastures recover from the drought conditions of 2021 and 2020.

To help your pastures improve here are a few points to consider:

1. Delay turnout until grass is growing well
2. Utilize some form of rotational grazing
3. Build plant diversity by over-seeding or inter-seeding legumes
4. Consider fertilization to improve productivity

Remember we are not only trying to maximize forage production, we are also trying to bring forage fields back from the stress that they have had over the past two-three grazing seasons.

Manitoba Grazing Exchange:

Moving into the 2022 grazing system, if you have pasture or cover crop fields available for grazing or are a livestock producer in need of grazing land check out the Manitoba Grazing Exchange (MGE). For more information on MGE and its benefits for crop and livestock producers go to <https://manitobagrazingexchange.com/about>

Related Resources:

MFGA Article Deciding When to Graze:

<https://files.constantcontact.com/cc34cd19101/5711114b-e43f-40bb-8381-863d59aaa34e.pdf>