

When to Turn the Cows Out

By John McGregor, MFGA Extension Support

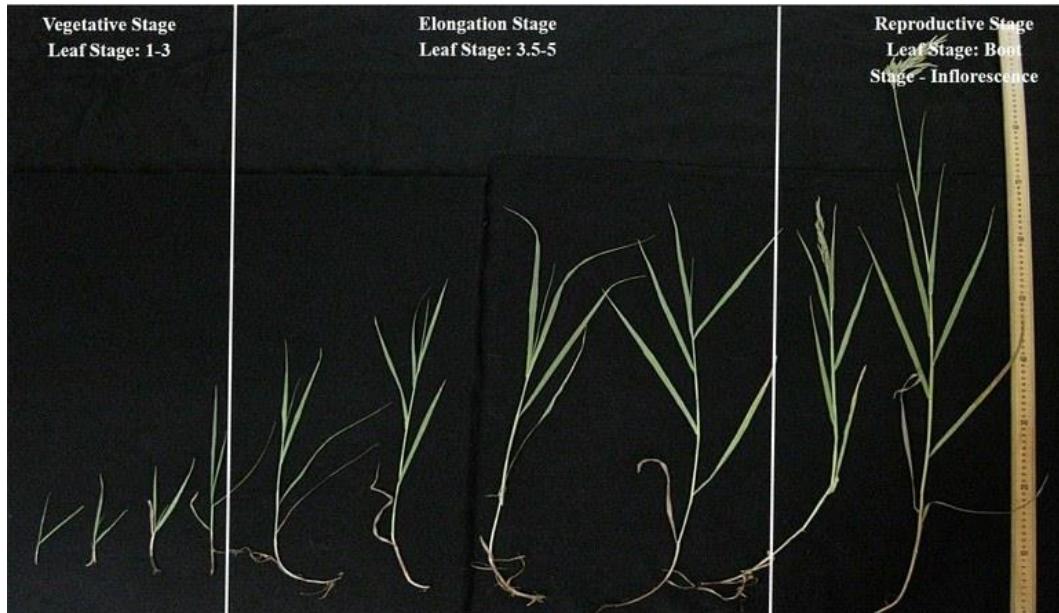
With the rains Monday and Tuesday, I noticed the lawn starting to green up. This is a good indication that pastures will begin to green up, and producers will be anxious to turn cattle out on pasture.

Most tame pastures in Manitoba consist to a high degree of cool season grasses. Cool-season grass tends to grow rapidly in the spring because they start growing once the temperature gets above 0 Celsius (C) for about 5 days. How quickly they grow is then very dependent on daytime temperatures, or growing degree days (GDD) and moisture.

Although it is tempting, pastures that are green and starting to grow shouldn't be grazed until they reach grazing readiness. Grazing too early can and does affect the long term productivity of those pastures.

Grazing readiness depends on a number of factors, including the species of grass, available moisture, weather, and past management. The general recommendation is not to start grazing

based on plant growth or when the plants are at least 4-6 inches tall. A better/different method is to use the development stage to determine when to start grazing. For tame (cool season) grasses that would be at least the three-leaf stage and for native (warm season) grasses the 3½ leaf stage.



This photo represents the morphological stages smooth brome transitions through; the vegetative stages of one- to three-leaf stage, elongation stage of three- to five-leaf and reproduction stage of the boot stage (five-leaf) to full inflorescences developed (Dupey, 2014).

Grazing before grasses reach the appropriate growth stage can reduce total production by as much as 60 percent during the grazing period.

When we look at grazing readiness, one of the considerations to keep in mind is what happened last summer and fall. Manitoba had a dry growing season in 2023, not necessarily a drought, but we saw pastures go dormant early in the grazing season, and it wasn't until the fall that we received timely rains that we saw some rejuvenation of pastures, and cattle were able to graze late in the summer and early fall.

This late grazing of little new growth had the potential to enable cattle to graze grasses below the growing point, grazing the fall tillers. Removal of these tillers in the fall can delay growth in the spring as the plant will need to initiate a new tiller, which has the potential to further delay grazing readiness by two additional weeks.

So, here is how to answer the real question: **when do I turn cattle out?** Ideally, you will want to start grazing when the grasses are about 6 to 8 inches tall, but not before they are 4-6 inches tall and the ground is dry enough to support the weight of the livestock without causing damage to the forage base. The more residues left from the previous year, and consequently, the more root bases and fall tillers, the earlier you can normally graze without damage.

If there is a high proportion of a legume, especially alfalfa, an increased height of 8-12 inches should be used.

Once pastures are ready to graze, it is important to maintain a stop grazing height to help forages from getting too far ahead and going to seed which leads to dormancy. Rotating cattle quickly through your paddocks and just allowing them to clip the tops of the plants during the rapid spring growth spurt keeps plants in the reproductive stage and extends the grazing period because as you clip the top third or so of the plant, it initiates new growth in the form of tillers and leaves during the rest period.

Unlike previous years, Manitoba experienced a fairly mild winter, which for the most part enabled producers to stretch forage inventory. For those with forage still on hand, cattle can continue to be fed until pastures are ready to be grazed. If forage supplies are tight, you may have to consider sacrificing a paddock until the rest of the paddocks are ready to graze.

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 past grazing seasons.