The Basics of Grazing Management

By John McGregor, MFGA Extension Support

1. A good guideline when grazing is to take 1/3, leave 2/3's. Generally, severe defoliation greater than 50 percent of leaf material decreases a grasses leaf area (for re-growth), leading to decreased root mass. Doing this repeatedly worsens the effect.

2. Adjust the number of animals per unit area and the length of time they are present to reduce the overgrazing of preferred plants or allow them time to recover afterward.

3. Timing and frequency of grazing are important. Grazing after grasses elevate their growing points is generally most harmful. When the terminal growth point is removed, the plant cannot produce any additional leaves or a seedhead. New leaves can only be produced if the plant activates either a crown or auxiliary bud to produce a new tiller. Complete tiller replacement is a slow process and may use substantial amounts of stored energy.

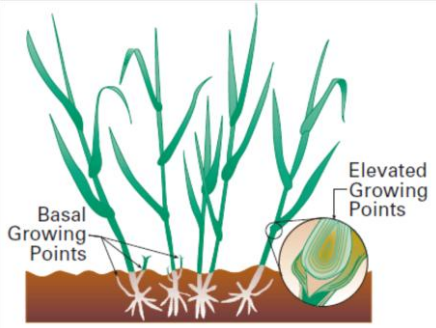

Figure 6. Elevated growing points are vulnerable to removal by grazing.

4. Plants need to re-grow leaves after grazing. The length of the recovery period is dependent on timing and severity of the defoliation and growing conditions. Cool-season grasses and mixed cool-season grasses and legumes should have 3 to 4 inches of residual leaf area for rapid recovery. How long the recovery period should last will vary within and among years.

5. Increasing the density of palatable plants can and does improve pastures. The length of time required for germination and establishment may be relatively short in moist environments, but limited rainfall and short, erratic growth periods in drier areas may require a much longer time between grazing periods.

6. Manage grazing animals to use the landscapes evenly. Paddock shape, water and mineral location can determine how evenly areas are grazed. Areas of heavy use often degrade and then enlarge as they lose productivity or less desirable plants invade and no longer meet animal requirements.

7. In most grazing systems there are differences within the paddock. These differences need to be managed to determine when, where, how many, how often or how long each

paddock will be grazed to allow full recovery of grazing plants. If you don't, you won't make much progress.

8. Nutrient intake over time is determined by the quality and quantity of forage available for that period of time. Animals can mix plants of differing quality to try to meet their requirements and normally consume a higher quality diet than the average of the plant community available to them, if given the opportunity for selection.

9. The quantity, quality and diversity of plants in and among paddocks must allow enough selection and intake to meet performance goals.

10. If animals use more of the landscape or learn to select a greater variety of plants, and those plants are given enough recovery between grazing to maintain or improve vigor, stocking rate can be increased.

When things don't go as anticipated, and they won't, some of these basic practices may help. Remember, more paddocks per herd increases operational flexibility, but sound decisions determine the outcome of an adaptive grazing management strategy.

For more information on grasses and legumes and their growth habits check out How Pasture Plants Grow