

Dealing with Drought



Overgrazing: The Expensive Option

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Michigan State University Beef Team

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When you see gophers carrying a lunch bucket across a pasture, you know the pasture is getting short! Unfortunately, that's what happens to a lot of pastures during a drought. It is hard on the livestock, hard on the pasture plants, and in the end, the producer will also suffer. When feed is running short, it's really easy to leave the animals on a paddock too long or not remove the animals from the pasture when you start feeding. Let us look at the benefits and the costs when grazing your pastures very short.

The benefit of grazing very short is that the animals will harvest a bit more feed, and you can put off supplemental feeding or culling animals for a few more days. The bad news list is longer.

From your grazing animal's perspective, those last few days of grazing mean they have to get by on a smaller quantity of poorer quality feed. You may not see it but yearling cattle gains will go to zero or they may even lose weight. In a cow calf operation, the calves are getting big enough that grazing is a significant part of their ration. On short pasture they don't get much to eat, and what they do is pretty low quality. To make things worse, mom's ration has decreased and she produces less milk. The result is calves that aren't gaining and cows that are getting thinner. If the cows have lost weight, they can go into the winter thinner and require even more feed to stay warm. It is not uncommon to see a drop in reproductive performance the second year after a short pasture season. Some people feel that the dry grass has more "power" in it and cattle can continue to gain. It is important to sort out the difference between dry short grass and no grass. Dry and not real tall pastures on a rotational basis can achieve good levels of production but when you are out of grass, you are out of feed and animals will not gain.

What impact does close grazing have on the plants? It is important to remember that after plants

are harvested, they either use the remaining green leaves to harvest sunshine or go back to the root reserves to start re-growing. When plants are grazed very short, re-growth is slowed and it may take 3 to 4 weeks longer to achieve a grazeable pasture after a rain. Grazing off those last few bites can significantly decrease the total forage growth for the year. In addition, if the plants are grazed close to the ground, when you get a thunderstorm and downpour, more of the rain will run off as there is no plant residue to slow the rain runoff. Also, with less ground cover, the ground will be hotter and more moisture will be lost to evaporation. To compound these problems, if the plants go into the winter with depleted root reserves of energy due to frequent grazing of the short green leaves, spring green up will be delayed and reduced in vigor. Grazing very short is not always bad, but it is important to understand the significant impact you will have on plant health and re-growth.

For the producer, the short term gain in not having to provide supplemental feed is quickly overtaken by the decrease in animal performance and less pounds of gain to sell. The "costs" of overgrazing can then go on for a couple of years by reduced pasture and animal performance.

When drought reduces and slows pasture growth, it is critical to monitor plant and animal condition to allow prompt action. It is much better to feed for 10 ~ 30 days mid/late summer when the longer daylight period will allow the plants to make maximum use of any rainfall. If you graze those last few days worth of feed mid/late summer, you may well have to start feeding 30 to 60 days earlier in the fall. No one likes to feed mid summer but prompt action will minimize the feed fed and still maintain pasture and animal performance this year and in the future.