

Benefits of Clipping Pasture

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Try out a simple pasture management upgrade this year – invest a little time to clip grass after each grazing, especially a heavy grazing. Clipping evens out pasture, promoting uniform regrowth, and preserves the forage in a vegetative state. If the cattle have grazed selectively, it prevents the overlooked species from becoming rank before the rest of the pasture.

In a rotational grazing system, clip the pasture immediately after removing the animals, especially in spring, when companion grass growth is stemmy. Lower, more evenly growing grass lets more sunlight reach lower and closely-grazed species and also eliminates older grasses that are heading and not as digestible. A lack of maintenance tends to favor less-grazed species.

Clipping just before the pasture's rest period promotes uniform growth and helps prevent a select few species from taking over. It also stimulates tillering and root growth, which means a denser stand, and can prevent any remaining weeds from going to seed. It's especially useful in eliminating or controlling difficult weeds like thistle. Following clipping, tender new grass growth will be stimulated.

You may find that pre-mowing is more appropriate to your needs than post-mowing, especially if you are trying to manage pasture that has gotten a little too mature. This gives you the same benefits of post-mowing, and you may not have to waste the cut material. With wide-swathing, it will dry quickly in the sun and continue to produce sugars, since the grass has no root structure to send the sugars back to. This makes it sweeter and more palatable, and you can then leave it for the cows to graze. Pre-mowing and baling the cut is another option.

Letting two or more species of animals graze can also be a useful management trick, since animals differ in the types of forage they prefer. Sheep like immature grasses and weeds rather than legumes; beef cattle prefer legumes over grass; and goats go for shrubby vegetation, and are generally much less selective. Horses trample and graze quite unevenly, so if you follow with cattle, they will often graze the mature growth left by horses. The typical grazing period on each paddock should be no more than 1 – 2 weeks, but this depends on the size of the paddock, the time of year, and the stocking rate. During a spring flush, grass may grow more quickly (but growth will be tender), but it often slows down during the drier, hotter weather of summer. With fall rains, growth takes off again.

Feed Quality Notes

Managing forage growth for high quality is critical for maintaining aggressive growth on cattle. Feed quality in pastures is optimal just before heading. At boot stage, right before the head emerges, is usually the point at which tonnage at high quality can be maximized. Top growth, which is mostly leaf material, is also much higher quality than the stemmy growth found in lower levels – a big reason why clipping pays off – to help keep that tough growth down to a lower height. Grazing only to 3-4 inch residual not only helps preserve the grass's growing point, but keeps animals off the less palatable growth. High quality biomass is rich in digestible fiber, which means greater palatability and feed efficiency. The rate of passage is slowed by the effective fiber, allowing more of the nutrients to be absorbed during digestion. A grass that is lignified, in contrast, is high in NDF, but low in fiber that can be digested by the animal. This is much more likely in grass that has headed out.