

# South Dakota Rancher®

Management tips for South Dakota livestock and grassland managers

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## Managing Spring Grazing

Tight hay and by-product feed supplies, high-priced corn, and with spring just around the corner many ranchers will be looking to get cows out on grass as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, however, early spring grazing typically has negative effects on season-long forage yields. Research from North Dakota suggests that grazing native range before the 3<sup>rd</sup> leaf stage can reduce carrying capacity by up to 50% in some situations (Table 1). The effects of early grazing on improved pastures are likely not as pronounced due to differences in management, climate, and level of agronomic inputs, but a 10% to 30% reduction in carrying capacity is not out of the question.



How early is too early you might ask? That simply depends on the type of vegetation you have available on your native range and in your pastures. Forage species such as crested wheatgrass typically

green-up a week to two weeks earlier than most other cool-season forage species. As stated earlier, grasses really need to develop to the 3<sup>rd</sup> leaf stage before they are ready to graze. Therefore, to avoid season-long reductions in forage yield, grazing managers should wait until crested wheatgrass reaches a height of 4 to 6 inches before turning cattle out. Similarly, managers should delay turn-out on the taller statured species such as smooth brome grass and intermediate wheatgrass until it reaches a height of about 8 inches.

Table 1. Comparisons of costs, production, and net returns of starting grazing before and after the 3<sup>rd</sup> leaf on seasonlong and twice-over rotation grazing systems on native range in western North Dakota (Manske and Sedivec 1999).

	Seasonlong grazing before 3 <sup>rd</sup> leaf stage	Seasonlong grazing after 3 <sup>rd</sup> leaf stage	Rotational grazing after 3 <sup>rd</sup> leaf stage
Stocking rate (AUM/ac)	4.04	2.86	2.04
Calf ADG	1.80	2.09	2.21
Net return (\$/ac)	0.75	7.02	14.79

Key forage species on native range (western wheatgrass, green needlegrass, etc.) however, typically take longer to develop to the 3<sup>rd</sup> leaf stage than improved forage species. In most years, turn-out on native range should be delayed until the heights of key forage species are at least 4 to 6 inches which is typically near the end of May or first part of June.

Conversely, native, warm-season tallgrasses, can benefit from some ***LIGHT*** early-season grazing. Research in east-central Nebraska has shown that grazing big bluestem at a ***light*** stocking rate in mid-May can improve utilization of forage later in the grazing season with out reducing season-long forage yields. However, managers should still wait for warm-season tallgrass species to reach the 3<sup>rd</sup> leaf stage or about 10 inches in plant height before turning cattle out. In most years in South Dakota this would be about late-May to early June.

Several opportunities exist to keep cattle off pasture until key forage species reach the 3rd leaf stage. Utilizing these opportunities can help maintain season-long forage production potential.

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