

South Dakota Rancher®

Management tips for South Dakota livestock and grassland managers

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Avoid Damage to Pastures during Fall Grazing

A little extra rain this fall and cooler temperatures have stimulated many cool-season pastures with smooth brome grass, Kentucky bluegrass, wheatgrasses and needlegrasses to provide some extra growth compared to the past several years. Extra fall regrowth is always welcome but as we move towards the end of the growing season, don't try to graze off every green blade.

Although it is tempting to keep livestock on these nice green pastures as long as possible, grasses need the opportunity to rejuvenate their energy reserves and root systems in the fall to allow for vigorous growth next spring. Grazing off a little regrowth just before winter could cost you a lot of spring growth next year.



Photo: E. Mousel, SDSU©

To help pastures reach their growth potential for next year, be sure to leave at least 6 inches of green leaves for the rest of the growing season. These remaining leaves will help plant produce energy needed for root growth and nutrient storage. Next

spring, these pastures will be ready to grow rapidly and yield much more than if grazed short in the fall.

Leaving a little grass on your pastures this fall will put more grass in pastures next spring.

Alfalfa for Fall and Winter Grazing

Some of the best fall and winter pasture is often overlooked. Alfalfa can provide considerable, high quality grazing this fall that provides some special flexibility at this time of year and helps eliminate the cost of baling.

Alfalfa makes an outstanding weaning pasture for spring calves or for yearlings coming off summer grass before going on feed. Cows can gain excellent condition before winter by grazing alfalfa during the fall and ewes and lambs perform very well on fall alfalfa pasture after the first killing frost.

Grazing alfalfa in the fall certainly is not without problems. Even though alfalfa that has been frosted and started to dry down has less of a tendency to cause bloat than actively growing alfalfa, bloat always must be a concern with alfalfa pastures.

To protect livestock from bloat, fill them with a lower quality hay to maximize gut fill before turning them out on alfalfa pasture and maintain access to lower quality hay throughout the grazing period. Also, using bloat protectors like poloxalene in lick block form or as a granule mixed with supplemental grain will drastically reduce the incidence of bloat on alfalfa pastures.

Another consideration is damage of the alfalfa stand during the grazing period. Only graze fields when they are dry and firm to avoid the damage of sensitive alfalfa plant crowns by hoof action of livestock. Reserve a small sacrifice area

for grazing and feeding any supplements when soils become wet to avoid damage to the entire field.

With the proper management techniques, alfalfa can make excellent late-fall and winter pasture for livestock.

Note: Portions of this article are adapted from The Hay and Forage Minute produced and edited by Bruce Anderson, Univ. Nebr.

Using Contact Weaning to Make Weaning Easier

Weaning time is upon us again and it is always a period of stress for cows and calves. In traditional 'blind' weaning systems, calves are removed from the cow and are not allowed any contact with the cow, which can be stressful for the calf. Some of the challenges we generally encounter during this type of weaning system include maintaining healthy calves and getting them on feed as soon as possible.

Contact or 'fenceline' weaning systems allow the calves to see, hear, and smell the cows and may allow some limited contact. In general, lower calf stress as a result of having some contact with the cows can improve immune system function and nutritional adjustments for the calf compared to blind weaned calves.

In a contact weaning program, the weaning pasture is split with a strong fence. The cow/calf pairs are moved into the weaning pasture about a week before weaning to allow them to become familiar with the fencing and watering systems so they become comfortable in their surroundings. At weaning time, the calves return to the same pasture and cows are moved to the adjoining pasture.

Fencing needs to be substantial enough to keep cows and calves separated and to prevent calves from nursing. Generally, 3 to 5 strands of electric, high-tensile or barbed wire, depending on if cattle are familiar with electric fence, should be sufficient.

Weaning calves onto high quality forage such as fall pasture regrowth or alfalfa residue will increase post-wean performance.

Contact weaning calves has the potential to improve performance and reduce costs associated with daily feeding and maintenance of drylot facilities.

Note: Cody Wright, SDSU Beef Extension Specialist and Dick Pruitt, SDSU Professor of Beef Production contributed to this article.