

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©

Cool-season grass species typically need at least a couple of weeks of regrowth before a killing freeze to allow plants to synthesize carbohydrate

reserves and translocate residual nitrogen from the aboveground portions of the plant to belowground organs such as rhizomes and/or stem bases for winter storage.

A killing freeze is generally considered three consecutive nights where the temperature reaches 20 degrees F or less. Management that prohibits these synthesis and translocation processes (i.e. heavy grazing just before a killing frost), inhibits the ability of the plant to adequately store reserves for winter survival and spring vigor.

Some late fall grazing on pastures will not hurt the winter survivability or spring vigor of key forage species. To help pastures reach their growth potential for next year however, be sure to leave at least 4 to 6 inches of green leaves at least two weeks to a month before first frost is anticipated. 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.

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