

Forage Facts

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A Day in the Spring is Three in the Fall: Tips on Early Season Grazing

By: Marianne Krahn

With poor feed quality across the Peace, you may be tempted to turn your cows out onto pasture early once you see the grass growing. While that may sound like a good idea here are a few things you might want to consider before doing so.

The way plants grow

Plants use energy stored in their roots to begin growth, and do not start generating their own energy with their leaves through photosynthesis until they are at the second- to third-leaf stage. However, nutrients from the roots continue to be used for growth by the plant until after the plant reaches the fourth- or fifth-leaf stage. After that, energy is primarily produced from the leaves via photosynthesis, and extra energy is stored in the roots. Proper recovery time will ultimately maximize or extend available grazing days.

If plants are grazed before the 3 leaf-stage, the vegetation is removed before the plants have had a chance to replenish



Left: Example of a grass plant at 2-leaf stage.

Right: Example of a grass plant at 3-leaf stage

ish root reserves. The rule of thumb is this: for every day early cattle are put out to graze in the spring, there may be three less days to graze in the fall. In other word, what you gain in the short-term is lost 3 fold in the long-term.

Leaf-stage

Leaf stages are defined by the number of leaves on the main stem only. A leaf is counted as complete when it is at least one-half the length of the leaf below it. To stage a crop, one must assess at least 10 plants at random.

From a nutritional perspective:

Energy requirements increase con-

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siderably immediately before and just after calving. These are two critical stages of production and the animals' nutritional needs must be met. Which means that for those of you who calve in April or May, the nutritional needs of your cows are at the highest when grass emerges. When cattle are consuming plants at emergence, they are getting 90 to 95 per cent water rather than essential nutrients like energy and protein, which can cause animal to lose body condition. Females that lose body condition cannot produce as much milk and this reduces growth rates of the calves. The impact to the breeding female is that it takes longer for the animal to cycle, and first-service conception rates come later. As a result, these animals cannot maintain reproductive efficiency.

When can you put your cows onto pasture?

It's best to wait until the 4-leaf stage or when the plants are at least 6 to 8 inches tall. If you have a high proportion of legumes in the pasture, do not graze until the plants are 8 to 12 inches tall. At that stage, energy is produced via photosynthesis and grazing won't harm plant growth. The plant is also higher in dry matter and essential nutrients and can better meet the animal's nutritional requirements.

What if I can't wait?

If you feel forced to pasture your cattle early, there are some things you can do to reduce the negative impact on pasture and ensure your cattle's nutritional needs are met.

Sacrifice pasture: Choose a field and keep the cattle on it until other pastures are ready for grazing. The grazing is usually supplemented with hay, greenfeed,

silage, grain, or commercial pellets to reduce demands on the pasture. In addition, ensure that mineral and trace mineral supplementation programs are continued. Choose only pastures that are high and dry, because punching soft soils will further injure the forages and reduce production. Regardless of the pasture you use, a very long rest period of 60 to 100 days will need to follow this early-season grazing.

Skim Grazing: Skim grazing consists of moving cattle through the pasture at a very rapid rate. The objective is to only take off the very tips of the leaves. It allows the plant to continue photosynthesis with the remaining part of the leaf. This is not as harmful to the plant as grazing off the whole leaves. The rate at which you have to move from pasture to pasture will depend on the size of your pastures and herd — from a few hours to a few days.



Stockpiled forage: Pasture that hasn't been grazed since June-July last year can be grazed as soon as the snow is gone.

It's important to sample stockpile forage as it's hard to determine how much nutrients are still in the plants after a long winter. Research shows that lactating cows on stockpiled grass usually needs some form of supplement.

Creep Feeding Calves: Creep feeding calves at 50 to 60 days of age with a 16 per cent protein feed will help alleviate the increased nutritional requirements of lactating cows needed for optimum milk production to raise a good-size, 600-pound calf at weaning. Less pressure on the cow means less pressure on fragile growing forage. This also gives cows the opportunity to put on weight if they have fallen short on body condition over the winter.

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Calving Series Part 3: Rotating Calving Ground



By Johanna Murray

It's getting into that time of year where everyone's talking about the dreaded scours. When it comes to disease prevention in your herd, there are a lot of tools available, vaccination of cows, vaccination of baby calves, antibiotics, treatment protocols, minerals, vitamins, and so on.

But when you're fighting something as aggressive as the scours pathogens, you might be doing all of the above and still not be able to get ahead of it. The scours microbes can live in bedding and soil for months, even years. If you're calving on the same pastures every year and having issues with this disease, it might be a good time to consider changing your management.

There are about as many methods of calving the herd as there are cattlemen in the world. Those raising purebreds or with small herds, calve in barns and corrals, where they can closely monitor cows and calves, and change out bedding regularly, but still have a lot of animals in close quarters. Others calve on pasture, on wintering sites, or on grass, where monitoring and treatment can be more challenging, but harmful bacteria are less concentrated.

Perhaps the easiest solution is calving later in the year on grass. Those who calve in May and even into June, swear by the system, the cows have less trouble and the calves are less likely to get sick. Of course, many of those who calve later are also working towards low input cattle which can mean a focus on calving ease which in turn affects calf vigor. But it also bears noting that the growing grass and bigger fields can drastically reduce pathogen build up.

However, those who calve in wintering sites earlier in the year gain similar benefits using the Sandhills Calving System, or other management systems that move the herd in some way to prevent build up of bacteria, viruses and other pathogens.

The Sandhills Calving System moves the pregnant herd, not the pairs. Every few weeks (depending on calving rate it might be more often) the pregnant cows are sorted off from the calved pairs and moved to fresh pasture, leaving the pairs behind. This system keeps the pairs of differing ages separate. A two-day-old calf

won't be mingling with a three-week-old calf which can significantly reduce disease risk.

The Foothills Calving system, a derivative of the Sandhills system, is the opposite. Pairs are moved from the calving herd to the next pen within 24 hours of birth. After two weeks or when this fresh pen is at capacity, a new pasture is selected and newborn calves are moved from the pregnant herd into another pasture. This system allows the operator to keep the calving herd close for monitoring, while still gaining the benefit of moving new calves to fresh ground, and separating the calves into smaller groups.

These smaller groups might seem like trouble - it could turn into a lot of gates after all - but smaller groups of calves mean that you're less likely to run into a major outbreak. One pen might pick something up, but it's a little less likely to spread. If you put some biosecurity measures in place like cleaning your doctoring equipment and machine tires, you should see even less infection in your other pens.

Then there's true pasture rotation. Which if you've ever tried to move young calves you're probably not particularly enthused about.

However, some ranchers do calve their cows while doing daily moves. In terms of disease suppression, daily or even weekly moves, are ideal. The herd is always moving to fresh ground before bacteria can build up and cause outbreaks.

Like any management change, you will have to train your cows. Slow moves so cows and calves stay paired, electric fence with high wires so baby calves can catch up to the herd if they get left behind. (This allows the cows to go back for their calves may train them to leave their babies behind, which can cause more problems later on.) If you bale graze, this system might even work for winter calving as you move from one set of bales to the next.

Changing up your calving system can take some work, from changing your bull schedule, to what you feed when over the winter. But if you're fighting to keep your calves alive every year, it might be worth it to consider a management change instead of another treatment option.



Upcoming Events

Event	Date	Location
Planning Your 2020 Cocktail Cover Crop	March 5th 10:30am Registration 11:00am Start	St. Isidore
Soil Health & Organic Production Workshop	March 20th	Dave Shaw Memorial Complex, Hines Creek
Afternoon with Akim	March 27th	PCBFA High Prairie Office

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