

Managing Native Grass Forages

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Timing Spring Grazing on Native Grass Pastures

Native grasses break dormancy in late March but will not begin to grow appreciably until late April. In a typical spring, eastern gamagrass and switchgrass will be ready to graze in late April, big bluestem by early May, and indiagrass and little bluestem in early to mid-May.

Regardless of species, it is important to delay stocking your pasture until there is enough growth of new vegetation to ensure that the plants can sustain grazing. If grazing begins too soon, the energy needed for regrowth will be drawn from root reserves rather than from active photosynthesis. If too much stored energy is pulled from the roots, the stand could be weakened. There must be enough leaf area to provide forage as well as to support photosynthesis at a level that allows for continued plant growth and replacement of forage consumed by grazing animals.

A good rule of thumb for initiating grazing in native grasses is to wait until average canopy height of the stand has reached 13 to 15 inches. Depending on grazing strategies, though, you may want to adjust this timing. For instance, under rotational grazing, which provides a good deal of within-season rest for the stand, you could start sooner. The earlier start will allow you to keep up with the rapid spring growth of these grasses as you move through your rotation. On the other hand, if you plan to stock the pasture at a high rate, you could allow more growth to accumulate before initiating grazing.

Balancing warm- and cool-season grazing during spring: One other key consideration is to decide whether you want to graze cool- or warm-season pastures during May and June. Both are actively growing at this time and both can provide good grazing. Unless you have access to additional stockers during this period, you should harvest the excess cool- or warm-season forage that accumulates at this time as hay.

During June, animal performance on cool-season pastures drops, while on native grasses it remains high. Furthermore, most cool-season pastures in our region are dominated by endophyte-infected tall fescue and develop increased levels of toxins (ergovaline) during this period. Because recently bred cattle can be particularly sensitive to fescue toxocosis, moving them off of tall fescue during June can contribute to improved calving rates. Thus, it may be better to conserve cool-season forage produced after late May as hay. Furthermore, ergovaline levels drop in hay when it is harvested and that hay can be fed at a time when animals are less sensitive.

An early cutting of native grass hay, before May 20, will produce a very high quality forage and will allow ample regrowth by early June to support grazing. Some of your warm-season pasture could be left unharvested for hay if additional forage is needed as you first move onto the native grass pasture. You will need to stock this material heavily though since by this time it will have become tall.