

Managing Native Grass Forages

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Rotational Grazing Native Grass Pastures

Like any forage grass, native warm-season grasses (NWSG) must be properly managed to get the most out of them. Regardless of species, native or otherwise, grasses must be maintained in the correct stage of development to ensure optimum quality, quantity, and stand vigor. There are two basic mistakes that made in grazing management: grazing too close and not grazing close enough. Rotational grazing provides an excellent way to achieve the desired balance and is perhaps the best approach for grazing NWSG.

The height range for grazing NWSG will be taller than for most other forage grasses. This is because they have higher growing points and have an upright, tall growth habit. Big and little bluestem and indiagrass should generally not be grazed closer than about 12 – 14 inches. Eastern gamagrass and upland varieties of switchgrass should not be grazed closer than about 14 – 16 inches and lowland switchgrass should not be grazed closer than 15 – 18 inches.

All of these species can get too tall if enough grazing pressure is not used. Once they get stemmy, quality and palatability will decline and, along with that, animal performance. With the exception of lowland switchgrass, none of the natives should be allowed to get beyond 24 – 26 inches tall or to develop seedheads. Lowland switchgrass may get as tall as 30 – 36 inches in a grazing setting without detriment.

Rotational grazing allows you to maintain the NWSG stand within the canopy height ranges mentioned above simply by moving cattle from one pasture to another. It also allows rest periods during the growing season that will help maintain vigorous stands and, as a result, minimize weed pressure.

Rotation frequency will depend on the stocking level and pasture size. Heavier stocking on smaller pastures will require shorter rotations while lighter stocking and larger pastures will require longer rotations.

Arriving at the proper stocking rate will take some trial and error, but based on UT research, for big bluestem and indiagrass about 1200 – 1800 lbs/ac, depending on stand quality and soil productivity, is about right. For eastern gamagrass and switchgrass, you will need about 2,000 – 2,600 lb/ac. These figures are for continuous grazing, so you will need to adjust for the acreage in your entire rotation. For example, with three 5-ac switchgrass pastures (15 ac total), you would need a group of cattle that weighs about 30,000 lb (15 X 2,000).

A rotational grazing system for NWSG could involve as few as three pastures. Movement among pastures should be based on grass height and **not** on a fixed number of days/weeks. When grass is growing faster (May and June), rotations will be shorter than late in the summer when growth has slowed. The amount of rest between entries should vary based on how close your defoliation is but may require as much as 42 days where grazing is close (i.e., below the height criteria mentioned above). Using the heights indicated above, spring grazing could involve as little as two weeks of rest.