

Having Your Grass and Horses Too Part 2

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Two weeks ago, I introduced a common situation in Butler County. People often do not have enough acres of grass to be able to graze the number of horses that they would like to. This usually results in an over grazed pasture, leading to problems with weeds, erosion, etc. I started introducing the principles behind a “Managed Grazing System for Horses on Small acreage” The second factor, after determining the forage type and maximizing production, is to realize how much of the forage can be removed and some management strategies that can increase this. The most important “rule of thumb” for grazing management is “take half, leave half”. This means that at the end of the grazing season, at least one half of the grass that was produced is left behind. This is needed to insure that the plant has adequate leaf area for the plants to collect sunlight and transfer energy to the roots.

The rule of “take half, leave half” DOES NOT mean that we can let the animals eat 50% of the production. We have to realize that animal trampling, disease, and animal waste can account for a loss of up to 25% of the grass produced. This means that our target for animal consumption is no more than 30%. Here is one example: healthy native grass will produce about 1 ton (2000 lbs) per acre. At 30% consumption, that means 600 lbs for the animal to eat. A 1200 lb horse will consume about 2 % of their body weight, or 24 lbs per day. That one acre of native is going to provide approximately 25 days of grazing, which creates the need for 7.2 acres for a 6 month grazing season. You can see why 2 horses grazing on 5 acres on a year round basis results in a less than desirable grass stand.

We may be able to increase production by changing the forage type and making improvements to agronomic practices such as fertilization, but our studies have shown that we can significantly increase the amount of grass that we can utilize by 1; Reduce non-grazing forage loss and 2; Reduce spot grazing. The easiest way to reduce the non-grazing forage loss is to manage the number of hours that the horses are allowed on the pasture. I would suggest that a horse will consume its daily forage needs in 10 - 11 hours of grazing. Keeping the horses in a dry lot for the other 13 - 14 hours will greatly reduce the amount of trampling and animal waste on the grass. People have been successful with having a dry lot where the shed, feed bunk, and water supply are located. We refer to the area around sheds and feed/water areas as “sacrifice areas. Since those areas will always be trampled, it is important to have no more than one. A gate to the grass is opened in the morning and the horses are brought in each evening.

One of the ways to reduce spot grazing is to divide the pasture into paddocks. This will provide rest and recovery for grass during the growing season and it will help promote uniform grazing. The size of these paddocks will be influenced by the number of horses, the amount of total acreage, type of forage, and the current situation. In part 3, I will share the particular management strategies of the Butler County field study and make other suggestions on this subject.