

Having Your Grass and Horses Too Part 3

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Over the past 3 weeks, I have shared some of the things we have learned from a field study relating to a managed grazing system for horses. We have been successful in developing some management strategies that allow us to graze more horses than we could under traditional grazing methods. In this article, I will provide the details of the original field study and the reasons for the management strategies.

In September 1997, an abused and over grazed 5 acres of native grass was planted to smooth brome. A successful establishment was accomplished by using a soil test to determine the appropriate fertilizer application, using a grass drill to insure a good "seed to soil contact", and having adequate moisture. Another key to good establishment is to not put any animals on the pasture for at least a year from planting. This allows the plants to develop a strong root system a before being subjected to grazing and trampling. If there is an adequate stand, haying the first spring is acceptable, but the mowing height should be at least 5". Because this stand was so good, we did fertilize with 30 pounds of nitrogen in February of 98. This would not normally be the case on new stands.

The pasture was divided into 3 paddocks, each having a gateway from the dry lot, (sacrifice area). The shed, hay and feed bunks, and the water supply was in this dry lot. Dividing the acreage into paddocks will increase our forage utilization percentage by reducing the spot grazing. The gateway into each paddock lets us manage the time the horses are allowed on the pasture.

The time of year that we can start grazing will depend on the environment and type of grass. With brome, that is usually around mid to late April or September. When the new growth is 6 - 8 inches, we will introduce the horses to the new forage by limiting the grazing to 2 or 3 hours per day and increasing the time over a week or so to a maximum of 10 to 12 hours. We continue to use one paddock until the grass is an average of 3 - 4 inches high. At this time, we rotate to the next paddock. The environment, number of horses and other variables will dictate the number of days we graze a paddock before moving, not the calendar.

The first time we rotate from a paddock, it is mowed at a 6 inch height. This eliminates the areas that were not grazed and the horses will not use when we rotate back to that paddock. Another management practice that can help increase the area that will be grazed is to drag the paddock with something like a spring toothed harrow backwards to scatter the manure piles. This will spread the nutrients in the waste and eliminate the "soiled" spots. This practice is done the second time we have rotated from a paddock.

When the brome is dormant from early July to late September, we turn out for no more than a couple of hours in the evening. We only use the pasture when grass is being produced, if not, the horses are fed hay and/or grain in the dry lot. This could happen during the growing season if there is not enough regrowth when we need to rotate back to a previously used paddock.

While these principles apply, all situations are different. Feel free to contact me to evaluate your particular situation and to discuss management strategies.

