

Having Your Grass and Horses Too

A managed grazing system for small acreage

Part 1

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In response to a large increase in the number of calls we are getting that relate to this topic, I am going to repeat a series of articles that appeared in 2012.

The question goes something like this: “What can I spray the weeds in my pasture with?” After I ask my questions to determine the situation that I am dealing with, I often find that it involves horses that are grazing 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on a limited acreage. For this type of grazing, we should be allowing 8 to 10 acres for each mature horse from May 1 until November 1 on native grass, and 5 to 6 acres if it is brome. These are only estimates, proper stocking calculation will depend on the size of the horses, length of the grazing season, and the type of forage we are producing. Most of the time, I find that there are not enough acres of forage available to graze the number of horses that are on it. The result is a weak grass stand and “grubbed out” areas that will not compete with the weeds. We have to remember that nature does not like bare soil. Nature is going to cover that soil with weeds by allowing those seeds to germinate. The best weed control measure is “Good grass management”. We have now come “full circle”. The only thing we will do by spraying those weeds is to kill the weeds that are currently growing. If we do not address the management changes that are needed, the weeds will be right back and there is nothing to show for the money that was spent on spray. I am not saying that chemicals are not an important tool in grass management, but they need to be used with other measures, not as a “cure all”

One of the changes that could be made is to reduce the number horses to match the resources that are available. Since most people are not anxious to do this, I have worked with several “small acreage” owners to develop grazing systems to address this situation. One specific demonstration involves 5 acres of pasture that was planted to brome at the beginning of this field study. Grazing was started in the fall of 96 and since that time, the number of horses using the pasture has been between 4 and 6 each summer, with no harm to the grass. This has been successful only because the land owner was willing to adopt some important management principles and to change his thinking about how to graze horses. I will address these principles and the specifics of management of this 5 acre pasture, but these same principles have been put into place in many other settings, and regardless of the number of acres or horses, type of forages available, and other variables, it has been done so with success.

One of the first steps in establishing a managed grazing system for horses is to evaluate the current forage production. Knowing the type of forage that is present is important. Whether it is a cool or warm season grass will dictate the time of year that we will be able to graze. Grass owners need to understand and employ the best agronomic practices to maximize the production of the forage that is present. Recognizing how forage production is influenced by the environment and soil type is needed to be realistic with the yield potential of that forage. The final step in evaluating the current situation is being able to admit, if needed, that the current forage has reached the “point of no return”. If this is the case, the opportunity is available to establish the forage type that will best suit the needs of the grazing program being established. In part 2, I will discuss more of the general principles and the specifics of this demonstration.