

Pasture Management

This factsheet is one of a series developed for livestock owners with small farms. Each factsheet focuses on an area of management that will benefit the health of your animals, as well as the health of your property's natural resources.



BMP Factsheet

Fall 2008

If livestock producers could match the feed requirements of grazing livestock to the amount of forage growing in a field for a given period of time it would provide them with a significant number of benefits. To accomplish this, you need to focus on fields and the forages growing in them. Think of your pasture as your crop and your livestock as means to harvest and add value to that crop.

A well-managed grass pasture is one of the most cost-effective and high value feeds that can be produced and utilized. Pasture management can provide significant benefits; including improved forage yields, lower feed costs, and improve livestock performance.

Pasture Rotation: In order to sustain a healthy field and grass crop, livestock need to be rotated through a system of pastures rather than being allowed to graze continuously on one large pasture. The pasture rotation system will include a system of cross-fencing to define areas of smaller pastures that livestock can be moved through. This system will result in more forage, less overgrazing and reduced compaction.

Divide pastures with permanent or temporary cross-fencing to provide 4-7 smaller pastures to allow you to control how long animals are allowed to graze a certain area. Begin grazing pastures in the spring after the grass has

Pasture management benefits:

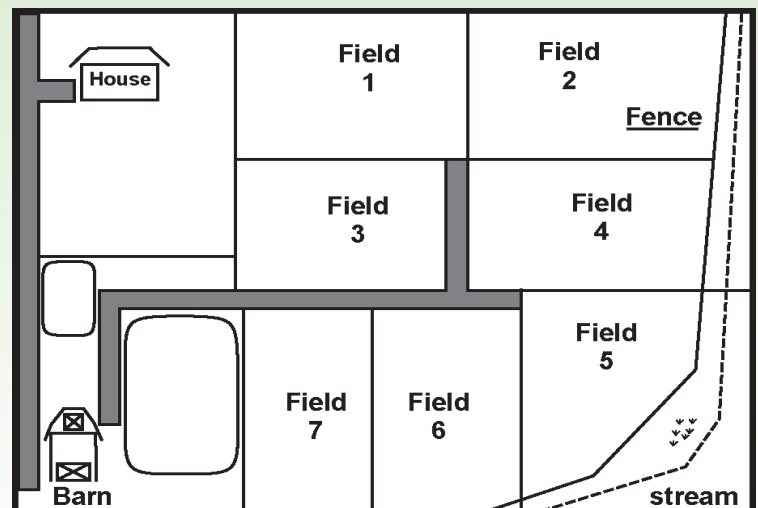
- Maximized forage production = lower feed bills
- Better livestock health = lower vet bills
- Minimizes risk of contaminated runoff from livestock manure and degraded pastures polluting local waterways
- Healthy pastures look better than muddy, weed-ridden fields.

Best Management Practice (BMP) Factsheets

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| Livestock Confinement | Composting |
| Reducing Mud | Pasture Management |
| Roof Runoff Structures | Fencing-Types and Costs |
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reached a height of 6" - 7". Allow livestock to graze pasture down to no lower than 3" before rotating to the next pasture. Left on their own, livestock will graze their favorite grasses over and over again, allowing other less desirable species to thrive and go to seed. Be sure to allow each pasture a sufficient period for forage regrowth after grazing; you want the grass to regrow to 6" - 7" height before rotating animals back to that pasture.

Generally, 15 to 20 day rotations are required through the spring, lengthening to 25 to 30 days (or more) in the late summer. Livestock may have to be removed to a confinement area when pastures dry out and grasses become



Cross fencing divides large fields into smaller management areas in order to implement a rotational grazing system that maximizes healthy forage growth.

Key points to remember:

- Keep grasses in a vegetative state.
- Consider the bottom 2-3 inches of the plant as an 'energy bank', which should be left for plant use, not animal feed.

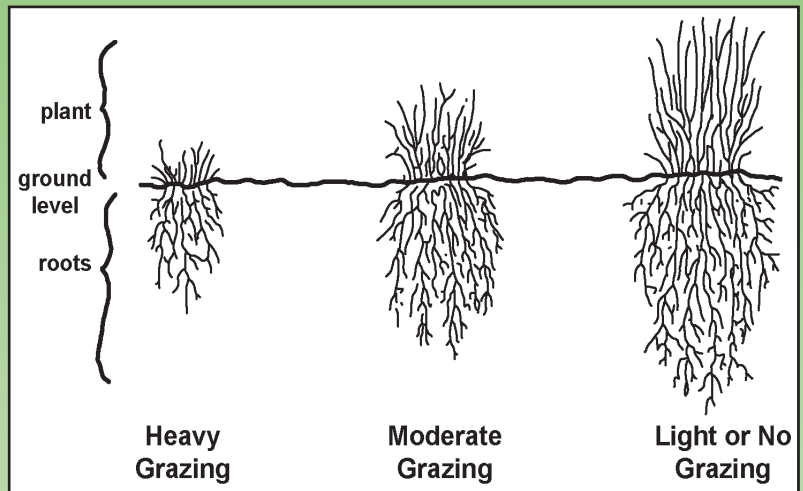
dormant. If livestock are allowed to continue grazing pastures down to bare earth, the root systems are destroyed and the grass will not be able to recover when rain returns.

Establishment of Confinement Areas:

Low light levels and low temperatures reduce forage growth from November through March. During these wet months livestock should be removed to a holding area such as a paddock or corral that is often referred to as a sacrifice area. The holding area should be located in the driest possible location. (See the Confinement Area factsheet for more.)

Avoid Overgrazing: Overgrazing results when there are too many animals on too few acres or when animals are allowed to be on pasture all winter, which leads to loss of productivity and degradation of soils. Overgrazing kills beneficial plants by grazing them to death. The resulting bare spots encourage weed growth, erosion and runoff of nutrients into nearby streams, ditches, swales and wetlands. Overgrazing also causes soils to become compacted, reducing growing capacity and limiting the amount of water that can filter into the soil.

"It takes grass to make grass." - Grazing or browsing too much of the leafy material will wear the plants down and reduce its ability to store energy in its roots for regrowth. Leave at least 3 inches of growth on your pasture forage. Vigorous plants can compete better with weed plants.



Other tips to help you achieve high production of grass:

- **Mow and Drag (Harrow)** – Mowing or clipping pastures after they've been grazed is beneficial if not all plants were consumed down to the desired harvest height. Clipping helps maintain plants in the vegetative growth stage; where they are most productive and nutritious. Clipping also helps discourage weed growth by preventing many weeds from going to seed.
- **Soil Testing** - Test soils on poorer pastures or on pastures that you plan to reseed to determine if your pH is out of balance or if you are short on any nutrients. Test every few years for other areas.
- **Reseeding** - If you do reseed pastures, consider soil types and how you will be using the pastures in order to select appropriate seed. Choose an early maturing variety for a pasture that you can move animals onto in early spring. For a pasture that is too wet in spring, select a later maturing variety. This will help balance plant growth, animal needs and soil conditions.
- **Aerating** - Soil that is compacted restricts root growth. Best advice: keep animals off pastures in wet winter months. If soil is already compacted, aerate in the area in the spring or early summer when grasses are actively growing and fill in rapidly.

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"To serve present and future generations of Whatcom County through a natural resource conservation program of leadership, partnership, and technical, educational, and financial assistance to foster a healthy, sustainable relationship between people and the environment."