Spring Pasture Essentials

Living on The Land

How you manage your pasture in the spring can make all the difference in your pasture's and animals' growth and health. Here are a few tips to keep your pastures healthy and productive.

Turning animals onto spring pastures

To keep your pasture healthy and productive, wait to turn your animals out until the soil has firmed up and plants have enough new growth. Animals turned out too early in the spring will compact the soft soil and damage plants. Grass shoots and roots get trampled and cut by hooves. Your pasture will be more prone to weed invasion and soil erosion, and the pasture's lifespan will be reduced significantly (Figure 1). Horses can founder when they graze grass too much or too early in the spring (Figure 2).

When turned out too early, animals will pull grass out by its roots, killing the plants. Always do the "pull test" to decide if it's safe for turnout: grab a handful of grass and tug. If you can pull it out by the roots, so can grazing animals.

How much plant growth is enough?

Plants should be 6 to 8 inches tall at time of turnout. Take livestock off when plants are grazed down to 3 to 4 inches tall. Studies show that 50 percent of root growth is stopped when more than 50 percent of the above-ground portion of a grass plant is removed. As shown in Table 1, plant growth above ground mirrors what is occurring below ground. A small root system can only support a small amount of plant growth.

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Figure 1. Severe impact of frequent early spring turnout: extensive weed invasion, soil compaction, and uneven ground.

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Figure 2. Horse owners must be cautious about how much early spring grass their founder-prone horses eat.

Table 1. Effects of forage removal on plant root growth.

Percent of grass plant removed	Percent of root growth stopped
10–40	0
50	2–4
60	50
70	78
80–100	100

It takes longer for a plant grazed very short to recover following grazing, too. Grass regrowth is based on how much green leaf area is left. Growth also depends on environmental conditions such as air and soil temperature and soil moisture. When plant growth is slow, recovery takes longer.

Rotational grazing

You can improve grass production and help prevent both overgrazing and undergrazing by using rotational grazing. Subdivide pastures

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into several smaller units (called cells). Move your animals through the cells as grass is grazed down to 3 to 4 inches high. You might need a sacrifice area (all-season pen) and some additional hay to hold animals until grass has re-grown and is ready again for grazing (6 to 8 inches tall). In dryland areas, it may be months before cells can be grazed again.

To help control internal parasites, move your animals to the next grazing cell after 4 or 5 days. Be sure not to return to a cell sooner than 21 days.

Safety

Each year before turnout, walk your pastures to make sure they are safe for animals.

- Check fences for breaks and down wires.
- Look for toxic plants and weeds. For more information, see the USDA publication *Plants Poisonous to Livestock in the Western States.*
- Scout for dangerous debris that winter floods may have carried onto pastures.
- Look for holes that animals could step in and injure a leg.
- Remove any old wire, metal, car batteries and other types of batteries, sources of lead paint, etc.

Landowners are resource managers

Good planning and a little patience before spring turnout will reap long-term rewards of improved health, good growth, and long life for your pasture (Figure 3). Making good decisions about spring turnout avoids having weeds replace your useful plants, which would mean buying more hay and increasing other expenses. Manage your grass to keep your pasture green and productive and your animals healthy and safe. And, a healthy pasture erodes less, so you don't lose your topsoil and pollute streams.

Other publications

For more pasture and animal management information, please see these other Oregon State University Extension Service Living on The Land publications:

Pasture and Livestock Essentials (EC 1634)
Winter Livestock Care (EC 1635)

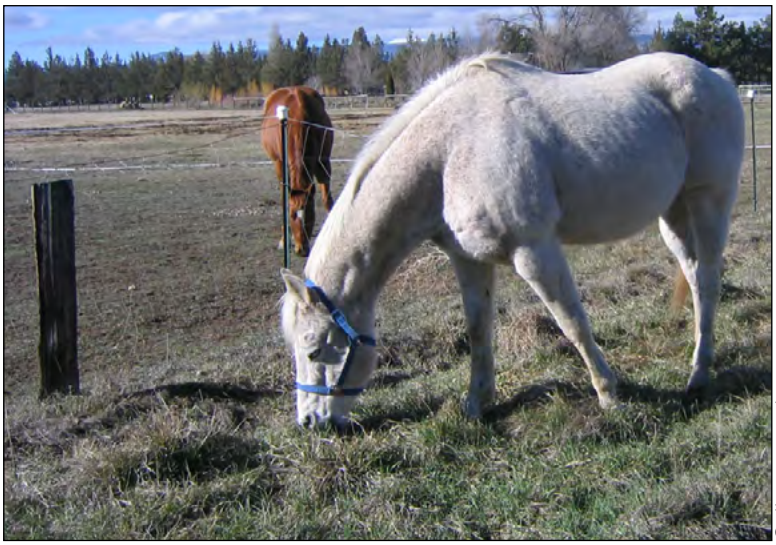

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Figure 3. The grass behind the fence was grazed too short during the winter and is still too short to be grazed. The grass in front was rested in the winter and is tall enough to graze in the spring.

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For more information on pasture and livestock management, contact your local Extension Agent, SWCD, or State Department of Agriculture. Technical and financial assistance is available for livestock owners wishing to address resource concerns on their property.

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