

POLK COUNTY GRAZIER

An eNewsletter brought to you by the Rich Mountain Conservation District

JUNE 29, 2021

What Pastures Need



When thinking about how to make our pastures more productive we need to understand what grasses and other forage plants need to in order to grow. Generally, it all comes down to sunlight, air, water, soil, and space. We have little or no control over most of these factors but they are all interrelated and connected. Because they are all related there are management strategies we can use that can help reduce any deficiencies. Let's look at each one of these to see why they are important:

- ⇒ **Sunlight** – Like we learned back in grade school, plants utilize chlorophyll in their leaves to convert sunlight into sugars. If you think about it, plant leaves are like tiny solar panels, taking in sunlight and making it into a more useable form of energy. Unfortunately, in order to utilize the energy created by plants for livestock feed we must graze the plant's solar panels (leaves). Consequently, when a pasture is overgrazed each plant must try to regrow more solar panels (leaves) using its root reserves of stored energy. The pasture then needs rest so that the plants can rebuild those depleted root reserves and become productive again. If the plants are overgrazed again too quickly the plant productivity may severely decline. There's a saying that "it takes grass to grow grass" meaning that if you leave some leaves on your plants they will be more productive.
- ⇒ **Air** – Plants mainly need two things from the air, a proper temperature and Carbon Dioxide (CO₂). Although different types of forage plants prefer different temperatures most of them grow in temps between 45F and 95F. Some of these forages like it on the cooler side (like Fescue, Ryegrass, and White Clover) and some like it warmer (like Bermudagrass, Bahiagrass, and Crabgrass). Thankfully, we live in a climate where the temps are moderate for most of the year so we can grow both cool season and warm season forages and have an extended growing season. Also, lucky for us, we have plenty of CO₂ in the air which plants need for photosynthesis.
- ⇒ **Water** – Lack of water is usually the most common deficiency preventing production in our pastures. Of course there can be a lack of sunlight (due to cloudiness) or the air temp may be too cold or hot for high production, but a drought can be devastating to forage production. A lot of times droughts come with those hot temperatures so a double whammy. Too much water can be a problem sometimes too but usually only in lower areas of a pasture that are prone to flooding or saturation. The Ouachita Mountains region receive more rainfall per year on average (50-70 inches) than anywhere else in the Arkansas. Although it seems like we're either having floods or droughts, generally our rainfall is spread fairly evenly throughout the year compared to other places. Maintaining grass cover allows more of this rainfall to soak into the soil rather than runoff.
- ⇒ **Soil** – Out of sight - out of mind, but as much as half of a plant is below ground in the root system. Most farmers understand that there are different types of soils based on the texture (Sand, Silt, Clay, Loam) that affect plant growth, but many may not understand the term soil tilth. Soil tilth is the overall condition of the soil as it relates to its suitability to grow plants and takes into account the physical, chemical, and biological features of the soil. All of these features are interrelated and some of them can be improved. For example, rotational grazing allows more organic matter in the soil which improves the soil biology and will increase the availability of nutrients to the plants. The added organic matter also allows more rainfall to be stored in the soil for later use. Other improvements, like maintaining cover can reduce the soil temperature in the summer by providing shade which provides other benefits as well.
- ⇒ **Space** – Plants must have room to grow and this is where we as land managers probably have the most control over production. Not enough space to grow causes deficiencies in the four other plant growth factors above due to competition for these resources. Just like an overcrowded forest with too many trees results in lots of small stunted trees and needs to be thinned, we must "thin" our pastures to achieve maximum growth and production. We do this by grazing our pastures to achieve the desired spacing (height). Overgrazing pastures too short causes a loss in production but so does undergrazing and letting the pasture grasses mature. When the grasses mature, the plants spend their energy making seed heads and not new leaves. An undergrazed pasture is less productive because growth slows but is also lower in nutritional value to the livestock.

Free Online Pasture Seminars-This week is on the economics of grazing

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