

PASTURE MANAGEMENT 101

by Josh Halpin



Pasture management is a very important issue for those who keep grazing animals such as horses or cattle. Healthy pastures are beneficial to the owners, animals and the environment. Animals will perform better and live healthier lives when they have the opportunity to graze on good forage. Good pasture management also protects the

environment. Healthy pastures can prevent degradation of the land through erosion and water loss. In maintaining a good healthy pasture, it is important to manage soil nutrients and pH, monitor forage growth and manage how much forage is consumed by the grazing animals.

Maintaining proper nutrient levels and pH in the soils of a pasture is vital for a healthy pasture. The first step in managing the pH and nutrients of soils in a pasture is to complete a soil test. A soil test is a simple, inexpensive way to gain vital information about a pasture such as the amount of phosphorus, potassium, nitrogen and pH levels in the soil. Along with this information, management recommendations are given based on the type of forage crop growing in a pasture. Soil tests should be done every two to three years.

Pasture managers also need to monitor forage growth and consider if the pasture is being grazed properly. By spending some time in the pasture, one can quickly discover if his pasture is being overgrazed. Grasses in the pasture should not be grazed down below 2 to 4 inches. If grasses are grazed below this level, they will lose their vigor and ability to be competitive in the environment. Grasses that are overgrazed will not have the ability to recover or experience regrowth. As grasses lose their competitive advantage, it creates opportunities for the encroachment of unwanted weeds, soil erosion and loss of the forage crop.

One management option to promote a healthy pasture and good forage for grazing animals is to implement rotational grazing. This involves using cross fences to divide the pasture into separate

units. The size of each unit varies on the number of animals and the amount of pasture land available. Animals are allowed to graze a unit to the proper height and then move to the next unit. As one unit is being grazed, the other units have the opportunity to recover and grasses can reestablish. If animals have the choice of the whole pasture, they will continually graze species that are more palatable and leave plants that are less palatable — usually weeds. With a smaller area to graze, animals graze the unit uniformly and utilize all the forage in the area. Another benefit to a grazing rotation is that new growth will be much more nutritious and digestible for grazing animals. As units recover and form new growth, animals can move in and consume this nutritious new forage. When implementing a rotational grazing system, it is important to remember some basic things, such as making sure there is water available in each pasture unit.

With good information and good management practices, owners can create and maintain healthy forage crops that will benefit themselves, livestock and the environment. For more information on pasture management, please call your local UGA Cooperative Extension office at 1-800-ASK-UGA-1.

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