Spring Pasture Management

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When it comes to spring pasture management, the first thing you should do is walk your pastures. While you may have walked pastures in the fall to identify places to seed or consider management changes to make in the spring, many things can change after a long cold winter. So, what should you be looking at in the spring?

Wet areas: Are there areas of the pasture that have standing water? Those areas will have lower yield and quality of pasture than areas that are well-drained. Another concern in these areas is the invasion of weeds. Wet areas can be managed with the design and implementation of surface or subsurface drainage systems.

Areas without vegetation: These areas can be as a result of the wet areas, disease, nutrient imbalances, soil pH, animal concentration, compaction, or wildlife. It will be important to determine the source of the dead areas so you can manage them properly. Disease concerns can be analyzed by university plant diagnostic labs. A soil sample will determine if there is a nutrient or pH problem. The soil sample result will have recommendations for nutrient and lime applications that can help correct the problem. If animal concentration or compaction are the concerns for the area, using a penetrometer will be the best way to evaluate it. Once you have all the results of the testing, consulting with a pasture specialist will be important to create a management plan to take corrective actions and meet yield expectations.

Weeds: There are many plants that will move in to your pasture. Some of these are of low concern, like clovers, and others can be more troublesome, like poison hemlock. In general, if animals are getting enough to eat and the pasture is in good condition, they will avoid the weeds. Using spot spraying or frequent cutting of weeds is a good way to control weed problems in a pasture if you do not want to rotate the pasture to a new crop. Maintaining good pasture condition and not overgrazing or not overcrowding is the biggest step in avoiding weed problems.

Water sources: Natural or installed water sources can experience lots of changes from cold weather, freeze-thaw cycles, and flooding. Areas of standing water can be problematic locations, ideal for breeding mosquitos and spreading disease. If you are using natural water access areas, making sure that the areas are stable and free of debris will be important for maintaining banks and limiting animal injury. Water lines for all installed systems need to be checked before they are used. Cracks and broken pipes can result in loss of pressure to water tanks, wasted water, and areas of standing water. Low water pressure and slow filling rates in water tanks will decrease water intake and in turn decrease milk production. Decreased water intake can also increase heat stress and lead to other disease problems. Testing all water sources in the pastures (natural and installed) is important to make sure that the quality of the water will not limit intake.

Fencing and grazing management: Using a combination of some rotational grazing and mowing through the season will help you provide more consistent yield and quality for the animals. In the spring, it is important to make sure that all the permanent fencing is solid for the safety of your animals. As you walk the pasture and inspect the permanent fencing, it is a good time to observe the pastures and think about paddock sizes. Paddocks are sized based on animal number, animal growth stage, number of days in the paddock, and total available pasture acres. There are management programs and professionals to help you calculate your paddock size and rotation schedule. A good place to look for pasture planning professionals is in your state Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Technical Service Provider (TSP) directory.

Nutrient needs: An important part of determining nutrient needs in a pasture is to keep records of your pasture management. These records include when and how long it is grazed, mowing dates, manure application dates, and fertilizer application dates. The next step is to add soil and pasture plant testing. Soil test results will give you the base that you are starting with to meet the nutrient needs of the pasture and recommendations for nutrients or lime needed to meet production goals. During the growing season sampling the plant material in the pasture will give you information on 2 things – 1. How well your pasture management is meeting the needs of your animals and 2. How well your pasture management is meeting the needs of your pasture. The final test to add is a manure test. In a pasture setting this can be a little hard to define, as most of the manure in the pasture is deposited by the animals and not applied from a spreader. For manure testing in pastures 2 samples are useful – 1. Some grab samples of the manure deposited in the pasture and 2. A sample of any stored manure that is applied. Using these 4 elements together, 1. Harvest/Yield and nutrient application records, 2. Soil test results, 3. Pasture plant analysis results, and 4. Manure test results will give you a picture of how nutrients are sampling in your pasture and where you can look to make improvements.

Managing pasture is an art that lasts year round. To help monitor and manage your pasture, **the Dairy One Forage Lab and Agro-One lab are introducing a Pasture Management Package.** The Pasture Management Package is designed for use in one pasture during one season and **includes 3 forage testing kits and a soil test kit ($75.00)**. Also included is an interpretive sheet with nutrient definitions, typical nutrient ranges, and some management suggestions for improving your pastures.

For more information, please contact Sally Flis via e-mail at sally.flis@dairyone.com, or the Agro-One and Forage Lab customer support team via phone at 800.344.2697, extension 2172.

Look for the following insert included with your DHIA reports during the months of May and June.