

Pasture Management



206-335-5634

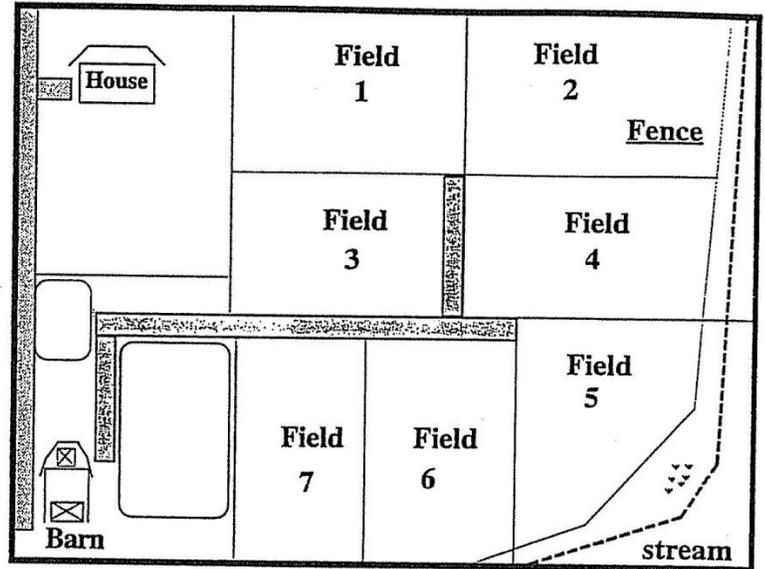
This fact sheet is one of a series written for people with rural acreages or small farms. It is geared to help you install a component or change a management habit that will benefit your farm operation, protect water quality, and protect the other resources on your property and in your community. Referred to as “Best Management Practices” or BMP’s, they are widely accepted as beneficial to both small and large farms, in improving animal health and farm operation, and in protecting the environment and quality of life.

Pasture Management should really be called ‘grass farming’. Think of your pasture grasses as your crop and the animals as your method of harvest. Matching the amount of grass with the amount eaten by the animals will reduce waste and prevent the need to make hay, which raises the cost of feed and can lower quality.

Key points to remember are:

- keep grasses in a vegetative state, and
- consider the bottom 2-3 inches of the plant as an ‘emergency bank’ which should be left for plant use, not animal feed.

Overgrazing causes bare spots and encourages weeds, erosion and runoff of nutrients into nearby streams and wetlands. The following tips will help you achieve high production of grass while also protecting the environment.

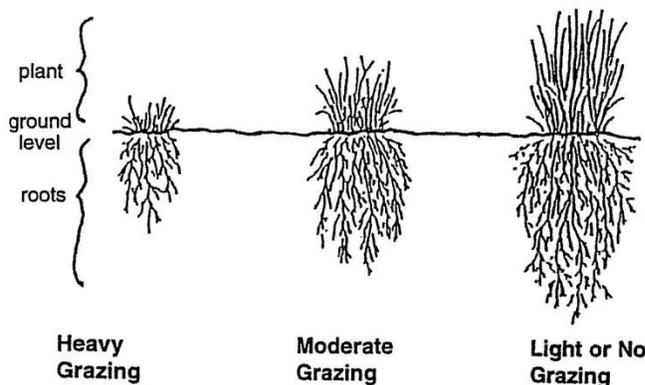


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- ◆ **Mow and Drag** – Mowing the pasture simply cuts all of the plants in a pasture to the same height. This prevents plants from getting too stiff and tough and from overshadowing each other. Dragging can be done with several devices such as chain link fence or an old bed spring. You drag this around the pasture to break up manure clods and spread them evenly throughout an area, making nutrients available on a more even basis.
- ◆ **Take Half - Leave Half** – This is a good rule of thumb to ensure that the plant has enough reserves left after grazing to permit rapid regrowth. Example: if the grass is six inches tall, graze down to 3 inches, then move animals. Vigorous plants can compete better with weed plants. Leave at least 2-3 inches.

AFFECT OF GRAZING ON ROOT GROWTH



- ◆ **Cross Fencing & Rotational Grazing** – Healthy pastures don’t just happen. You need to control how long animals are allowed to graze a certain area. Left on their own, they will graze their favorite grasses over and over again, allowing other less-desirable species to thrive and go 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 and 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.
- ◆ **Compaction** – Soil that is compacted restricts root growth and prevents water from moving through the soil to roots. Best advice: keep animals off pastures in wet winter months. If soil is already compacted, aerate the area in the spring or early summer when grasses are actively growing and fill rapidly.

SITE SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS:

See SCD Easy BMP fact sheets on fencing, sacrifice areas, and alternative watering systems to learn more.