

Fall Grazing and Preparing for Winter | NWSG Management Series

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These are the principles, tips and tricks about grazing a stand of Native Warm Season Grasses (NWSG) in the fall to prepare for winter. This take-to-the field guide is a summary of the video by the same name.. Other videos in this series discuss grazing young plantings and grazing in other seasons as well as haying NWSG and management topics such as fertilizing and burning. Below are concepts to keep in mind as you graze NWSG in the fall.

Importance of Fall Grazing Management

In the fall, the NWSG plants are creating root reserves by moving energy and nutrients from the plants' leaves into the root system. During the winter the plants live off of these root reserves and when spring comes the root reserves are used to begin the spring growth of the plant. If plants do not have adequate storage of root reserves, it weakens the plants potentially causing a decrease in forage yield next year and allowing weed encroachment.

Principles for Fall Grazing

There are a couple of ways to think about grazing in the fall, but ultimately the goal of both is to allow the NWSG to store adequate root reserves.

The 8-45 Principle

This principle is a reminder to have the NWSG plants at least 8 inches tall 45 days before the average first frost date. Furthermore, as the plants are growing and storing root reserves during these 45 days, don't allow the livestock to graze them. This period of rest should allow the plant to store away adequate root reserves.

18 Inch Principle

This principle states that the livestock should be removed from the field 4-6 weeks before frost and the grass should be 18 inches tall at the first killing frost. Note that the longer 6 week rest period is needed for continuous grazing and typically the shorter 4 week rest period is adequate for proper rotational grazing. This rest period and the 18 inches of accumulated growth should allow the plant to store away adequate root reserves.

Combined 8-45 and 18 Inch Principles

Have the grass at least 8" tall and remove the livestock 45 days before frost and this will likely result in plants that are 18" tall at the first killing frost. Learn from year-to-year how these 2 principles play together in your particular site and what period of rest is needed for your operation. Astute land managers can adapt these principles to the their land and grazing system by watching the NWSG fields from year-to-year. Consider the following as you finetune the principles:

Soil moisture - If the year is unseasonably dry, additional rest or plant height may be of benefit.

Dry sites - Plants growing on dry sites never get as tall as those on better soils, so the desired height at frost may be less on these dry sites.

Grazing method - Usually continuous grazing systems require a longer fall rest while proper rotational grazing requires a shorter rest.

How Important is the Fall Rest?

When there is a large percentage of a grazing operation in NWSG, the fall rest becomes less important simply because only a small percentage of the acres of NWSG are being grazed in the vulnerable fall period. Consequently, if next year's production is indeed hindered by the fall grazing, it is only on a small percentage of the NWSG acres. However, if you do graze the NWSG in the fall, "keep it random". In other words, don't graze the same field fall after fall but rather change it up by grazing different fields in the fall.

