

Waning Summer to Early Fall Transition Requires Increased Scrutiny of Pastures

Late summer is the time of year when everything seems to grow weary of the heat and humidity. We look forward to the cooler days of fall with great anticipation. Looking out at hayfields and pastures, it seems that even they are ready for a change of season. This is an important time of transition, and management decisions made now can powerfully impact the winter and early spring forage program.



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When management is discussed, it is important to give the necessary nod of respect to the environment in which we live. This summer has been a dry one, with some areas getting a welcome break with spotty moisture falling for a couple of weeks. That was a brief respite, and many fields are dry and forage growth is slow.

Good management requires the setting of priorities. If a priority is to keep a stand of grass alive through the winter to provide spring grazing, then animals must come off the grass when the forage height is 3 to 6 inches, depending on the forage species. Bermudagrass, crabgrass, and dallisgrass can be grazed down to 3 inches. Tall fescue can be grazed down to 5 inches. If unsure, study the how the grass grows. Those grasses that tend to be grow more prostrate and spread can be grazed lower. Bunch grasses or tall growing grasses (such as tall fescue, orchardgrass, johnsongrass, sorghum-sudangrass) will not tolerate low grazing. During the late summer, it can also benefit the forage to let it stay even taller, allowing more leaf for photosynthesis and storage of food to survive the winter.

If forage is in short supply, avoid waste. This is the time to use electric fencing or some other form of temporary fencing to control access to grass. Fields can be subdivided to allow more uniform grazing down to the minimum height, with less wasted forage. This controlled grazing (some call it rotational grazing) opens up a whole new world of additional management options.

When forage supply is limited, animals may be tempted to try plants they would normally avoid. Increased observation of pastures can make us aware of toxic plants in the fields and manage appropriately. Perhaps the deadliest weed I see this time of year is perilla mint. This plant is a square-stemmed warm season annual. Old-timers call it rattlesnake weed

because the mature, dried seed heads rattle when shaken. As a member of the mint family, it has a strong smell when rubbed or crushed—but make no mistake about it—this plant is deadly. If you decide to spray to eliminate this weed, be sure to keep animals away from it after spraying. For a window of time after spraying, the plant is more palatable to our livestock and they may be tempted to take a deadly snack.

This transition period is also the time of an unwelcome visitation from fall armyworms. They've been reported in the Lascassas area, and with enough numbers they can make the forage disappear. Be on the lookout and be prepared. Harvesting the field before the armyworms decimate it is an option if there is enough forage to make it worth it, or treatment is an option as well.

Transition seasons can be challenging—there is a weariness of the current state of affairs and an eagerness for relief—but managing the transition (as much as environment permits) can make that relief even sweeter when it arrives.

For more information, please call Rebekah Norman in your local Rutherford County UT/TSU Extension office at 615-898-7710 or visit our website at rutherford.tennessee.edu.