

Site Evaluation: The First Step to Improved Pastures

By Rhonda R. Gildersleeve¹ and Eugene H. Schriefer, Jr.²

Introduction

Developing or improving pastures can be expensive and should be considered a long-term investment. Therefore, as with any investment, planning of pasture improvement deserves some careful thought. Attention to details now will save time and money later as you get into the establishment and management phases.

Part of planning for pasture improvement includes setting some goals for your property. What are your short-term goals for this piece of land? What are your long-term goals? What is your time commitment and philosophy towards managing the land? Visualize WHAT you would like the pasture to look like once established, and determine what needs or expectations you have for that improvement. From that vision, you can develop as list of details that will help you outline a work plan for the project.

A second step is to inventory the resources at hand by answering a couple of questions: i.e. what condition is the pasture in, and how much time and labor is needed for the initial improvement and maintenance once the pasture is developed? Obtain an aerial photograph and sketch existing fences, watering facilities, making note of their current state of usefulness. Indicate the species currently in the pasture units. Evaluate the pasture condition by following the UW Extension Publication A3667: Pasture Condition Scoring, <http://cecommerce.uwex.edu/pdfs/A3667.PDF>. Be sure to note any special areas or issues that must be dealt with: undesirable species (e.g. endophyte infested tall fescue, weeds, brush), density of the stand, poor vigor, lack of legumes, severe grazing in streamside areas, seeps or springs that need to be protected, compaction or animal concentration areas, etc.

To assist you in this portion of the planning stage, consider the questions in Worksheet 1. As your pasture improvement plans take shape, many of the decisions you make will be based on how some of these questions are answered.

¹Agriculture Agent, Iowa County UW Extension, 222 North Iowa Street, Suite 1, Dodgeville, WI 53533. Phone: (608) 935-0391; Email: rhonda.gildersleeve@ces.uwex.edu

²Grazing Specialist, SW Badger RC&D Council, 150 Alona Lane, Lancaster, WI 53813. Phone: (608) 723-6377, ext. 114; Email: Gene.Schriefer@wi.usda.gov

© University of Wisconsin Board of Regents, 2006



WORKSHEET 1. Questions to Consider when Developing a Pasture Improvement Plan

Questions	Options or Considerations	My Situation
<p>What are my short-term goals for this pasture?</p> <p>What are my long-term goals for this pasture?</p>		
<p>What animal species and class of animal(s) will utilize this pasture?</p>	<p>Cow-calf pair, stockers, market lambs, horses, bulls, dairy replacement, milking herd, exotics (llamas, alpacas, emus, etc.)</p>	
<p>How will this pasture improvement fit in with the rest of my farm operation?</p>	<p>Will this be: a primary pasture for small acreage; expansion of available pasture acres on farm; renovation of existing pasture; conversion of cropland into pasture?</p> <p>How much feed do I expect the pasture to supply for my animals? (examples: 25%, 50%, 100%)</p> <p>How early in the season do I need to start grazing?</p> <p>How long do I expect to graze: 150, 180, 210, 240 days? <i>Typically the season lasts 150-180 days but supplemental feeding can extend it.</i></p>	
<p>What level of performance do I expect from livestock grazing on this pasture?</p>	<p>Do I need maximum production (lbs. of milk or gain animal versus per acre); maintenance; exercise; and/or other uses such as hay, wildlife habitat, etc.?</p>	
<p>How will I manage this pasture once established/renovated?</p>	<p>Will I maximize site potential with appropriate fertilization, weed control and grazing management?</p> <p>Is the site accessible for management practices such as mowing, fertilization, seeding?</p> <p>Do I need to produce hay as well as provide grazing?</p> <p>Does the pasture need to be a low input system with minimal management requirements?</p>	

Questions	Options or Considerations	My Situation
<p>What facilities and resources do I have or need to develop as part of the pasture improvement or renovation?</p>	<p>Is water available or will a water system need to be developed?</p> <p>Are improved lanes needed?</p> <p>Fencing and livestock handling facilities?</p> <p>Pastures for multiple groups of livestock that must be separated?</p> <p>Time and labor constraints?</p>	
<p>What are the pasture's soil and physical challenges and opportunities at this site?</p>	<p>Dominant pasture species:</p> <p>Grasses</p> <p>Legumes</p> <p>Are forage species compatible with my desired production & management plans?</p> <p>Drainage—well drained, poorly drained?</p> <p>Soil fertility: nutrient levels, pH, organic matter, etc.</p> <p>Topography: slopes, aspect, rocky, etc.</p> <p>What forage species are adapted to my soils?</p> <p>Weed problems: poisonous plants, brush, etc.</p> <p>Trees: Can I use as a shade paddock during hot weather or do trees need protection from grazing?</p> <p>Other considerations: streams; wildlife habitat needs, etc.</p>	
<p>What economic returns do I expect or need from this investment?</p>		