

Grazing Stockpiled Forage

by Dr. Dan Undersander, University of Wisconsin

Many pastures will have accumulated forage this fall due to the generally good late season rainfall and temperature patterns. Accumulated or stockpiled forage can be an excellent source of forage for animals. Fall stockpiled forage is brown but is high quality since it is largely leaves, unlike summer accumulated brown forage which is stemmy and low quality. Grazing stockpiled forage is an excellent way to extend the grazing season and reduce costs of harvesting/buying forage.

In trials conducted at Arlington and Lancaster, Wisconsin, fall accumulated forage was about 73.4% digestible in October and declined to 70% digestible in December and 65.5% in March. Digestibility declines are reflected by gradually increasing NDF from 51% in October, 57% in December and 61% in March. This quality would be more than adequate for sheep, dry cows and for growing animals. This can also be excellent forage for pleasure horses.

A quick note: the tonnage of stockpile forage would be 1 to 2 tons/acre higher if 40 to 50 lbs nitrogen/acre had been applied in early August. Grasses use up all the nitrogen available in the early season growth cycles and, while they will turn green in the fall, they will produce little growth without additional nitrogen.

The different grass species maintain yield and quality differently. Timothy, smooth bromegrass, and quackgrass suitable for fall grazing; they tend to lose quality after December. If these species have not been grazed or harvested, they will have stems and grazing should be limited to what leaves the cattle will consume. Late-maturing orchardgrass is best utilized by December for similar reasons. It will not stand up under snow. Tall fescue, early-maturing orchardgrass, and reed canarygrass are suitable for grazing fall and winter, and, especially, late winter grazing; they dry matter and forage quality persist longer into the spring.

If you want to do more stockpiled grazing in the future, you might consider the above information when selected pasture species to seed.

The key to maximizing the benefit of the forage accumulated in the pastures is to give only give a small amount at a time to grazing animals. If animals are given 2 to 3 days feed at a time, they will consume about 70% of the residue but if simply turned loose on a large pasture only about 30% of the residue will be consumed and the rest trampled down. Also, be careful to accurately estimate the available forage. I see many who overestimate the forage available and then animal intake (and performance) declines.

While posts may be difficult to get into frozen ground for moving the electric fence, other options are available. One of the simplest is to fill gallon ice cream buckets with sand and water and then stick a fiber glass fence post into the bucket. When the water freezes, you have a movable post that sets on the soil surface and can be used for supporting polywire fencing.

Don't pull animals off pasture just because of snow. Cattle can graze through up to 2 feet of snow and sheep up to 1 foot of snow if there is no ice or a hard crust on the snow!

Water requirement is also much less than over summer but some water should still be made available to animals grazing stockpiled forage.

Also, analyze a sample of stockpiled forage for minerals and consider providing a mineral mix to animals for any mineral at low levels in the stockpiled forage.