



Rotate Graze to Increase Stocking Rate, Improve Forage Persistence and Suppress Weeds

By Wayne Tankersley

There are numerous ways to maximize pasture utilization and efficiency, but perhaps none more so than implementing some form of grazing management system. Without question, a key component of any grazing system would be a pasture “residue and rest” or rotational grazing scheme.

The concept behind a “residue and rest” grazing scenario is quite simple. Livestock pastures are sub-divided into small mini-pastures or paddocks. Livestock are allowed access only to one paddock until the forage is grazed to a predetermined height. At that time, the animals are moved to the next paddock while the grass in the previously grazed paddock is allowed to rebuild energy reserves and produce new forage growth. This process is dependent on weather conditions, but can range from about 2 weeks for bermuda, bahia and clover to 3-4 weeks on more for fescue, orchardgrass and some of the native grasses. (See Table 1)

The advantages of rotational grazing are numerous and well documented. Studies have shown forage utilization is significantly higher in a rotational grazing scheme than with continuous grazing. (Table 2) Total production of forage is also greater. These two advantages combine to allow an increase in cattle stocking rates of 20-35%.

Another plus for rotational grazing is its positive effect on pasture weed control. Weeds are very opportunistic and as such, become quickly established in pastures with

Table 1

Forage Utilization	
<u>Grazing System</u>	<u>% Utilization</u>
Continuous	35
3-4 paddock rotation	50
8+ paddock rotation	60
Source: NRCS – USDA	

thin grass cover. Forages in rested pastures are more vigorous and healthy with thicker ground cover, thus helping to prevent the introduction and establishment of unwanted weed species.

The resting period allowed in a rotational grazing system gives the added benefit of a more robust pasture forage plant. These stronger plants grow longer into the early stages of drought and respond quicker with new growth when adequate rainfall occurs. This provides greater persistence and longevity of the grass stand.

The advantages of rotational grazing do not end with these. Additional benefits cited include improvement in animal parasite control, easier handling cattle and improved livestock management. It also enhances recycling of nutrients through more uniform distribution of feces and urine.

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Table 2

<u>Forage</u>	<u>Begin Grazing</u>	<u>End Grazing</u>	<u>Days Rest</u>
Fescue	4-8"	2-3"	15-30
Bermuda	4-8"	1-2"	7-15
Bahia	6-10"	1-2"	10-20
Orchardgrass	8-12"	3-6"	15-30
Source: Southern Forages 2 nd Edition			