

MANAGING GRAZING SYSTEMS FOR HORSES

The Situation

Horses are notorious for damaging pastures. In any pasture, horses will develop “zones”. This applies to continuously grazed pastures as well as to individual paddocks in rotational systems.

The zones that horses establish in their pastures are:

- 1.) Horses select an area within a pasture or paddock in which they prefer to eat the forages. Often this area is eaten to a very short residual stubble height, while other areas surrounding it have very decent forages that they ignore. This is the phenomenon of “spot grazing”, which horses excel at.
- 2.) Horses like to dump most of their manure in a particular area of the pasture or paddock that they are occupying. They do not consume the forages in that area because they are repelled by their own manure. This area grows up to be very ripe and undesirable forage from a quality point of view. It does grow well because of the fertilization that is done in that zone.
- 3.) Horses like to lounge in the area close to the gate, or closest to the farmstead, barn, or house. This area becomes a livestock concentration area in which the vegetation is not allowed to grow because of the heavy use by the horses. This area is difficult or impossible to avoid.
- 4.) The remainder of the pasture or paddock is basically ignored by the horses. The forages grow to maturity with little to no grazing pressure. This represents a significant quantity of forage that is not used, even though it is available for grazing.

The Solution

Horses should be grazed in a managed rotational type of a grazing system so that the forages can get an adequate rest period for recovery. This type of system also spreads out the number of sites in which the horses prefer to graze.

Fence: In a pasture type of setting where intensive management is used, design the system to provide a minimum of six paddocks, so that an adequate rest period can be provided to the forages. Within each paddock fence off (using temporary fence materials) the area they most prefer when the residual stubble height in that area is at that which is desired: 2 inches for Kentucky bluegrass and 3-4 inches for all other cool season grasses.

This will effectively force them to graze other areas that they have been avoiding. However, they will most likely avoid the area in which they dump most

of their waste. Do not exclude them from that area, but continue to allow access to it.

The horses may develop up to three areas that they prefer within a paddock. Just keep using the temporary fence to push away from areas that they are overutilizing until they have basically run out of grass in that paddock. Do not force them to utilize the area that they place their waste in.

Management of the Plant Community: The manner in which they graze allows undesirable plants to gain a place in the paddocks. Quite likely brush, trees, and broadleaf weeds will become common. Mowing the pasture or paddocks is advisable periodically to maintain a grass plant community.

System Design: Plan the system in a manner that will allow the livestock concentration areas to be in locations where there is minimal to no risk to the environment, such as erosion and reduction in water quality.

Plan for a livestock watering system to service each of the paddocks to reduce travel in lanes, reducing the risk of erosion.

Plan for no more than a six day grazing period within each paddock.