



Rejuvenating Tired Pastures

By John McGregor, MFGA Extension Support

When it comes to unproductive pastures, the cost of a complete do over can be prohibitive or questionable especially when there is still some production present.

For pastures that are still productive but production is limited there maybe some low cost possibilities that can be considered.

One of the first things to consider when making a decision is if you have the right species in the pasture that need rejuvenating. If you don't have the right species your choices or plans may need to take a different direction.

No matter what option you decide on grazing management needs to be foremost in your plan.

The more you can manage your pastures with animals by returning nutrients from where they came, the more resilient the pasture will be.

Part of this nutrient recycling is the grazing cycle. Knowing when to start, when to stop and the rest periods in between defines a well managed grazing system.

Pastures are composed of perennial plants and the grasses produce tillers as they grow. These tillers are "baby plants" and live for more than one growing year. They start in the fall but in the spring it is important to let them reach at least the 3 leaf stage before beginning to graze. Plants, once they have reached this stage, it's a good indication that they are accessing nutrients that were used surviving winter and are ready to go.

The tiller buds were formed last fall, and they determine yield potential this spring. When we leave 2 ½ leaves per tiller on the plant in the fall we are setting the plant up to have good nutrient reserves to survive winter and get an early jump in the spring.

Good, well managed grazing practices can do wonders in making a low producing pasture more productive.

Evenly distributing nutrients across pastures will provide the necessary nutrients to promote and maintain forage growth throughout the growing season.

Not grazing too soon or too late in the spring and fall will allow plants to maintain a healthy root systems and adequate food storage reserves to survive winter and get an early jump on spring.

Finally following a grazing schedule during the growing season that prevents overgrazing and allows plenty of rest between grazes will keep the root system healthy and the pasture productive for years to come.

Seeding

Unproductive pastures that are thin or have the wrong species present may need more than just grazing management to bring them into production.

Other than a complete do over some producers look at sod seeding to improve pastures. This method requires correct timing usually in the spring when the ground is soft to allow equipment penetration. It also enables the new seeds to take advantage of existing moisture.

Depending on the state of the pasture, the addition of a legume may be a good option. Because a legume seed like an alfalfa does not have a hull, it's able to get growing quicker, fixes, nitrogen, boosts forage quality and adds risk adverseness for a drought due to its deep root system.

Another method uses the cow itself to introduce legumes into a pasture. Mixing legume seed with mineral and allowing the cows to seed via manure can have some success. Legumes can travel thru the cow a lot better than grass seeds. The drawback here is that legumes will only establish where the patties are dropped and will require additional management to enable the plants to spread.

Broadcast seeding and letting the cow work the seed in with their hooves is another method to consider. Early spring likely works best when the soil is a bit moist under stockpiled forage. As the stockpiled forage starts to green up, the cattle graze close to the ground surface. Using a little higher stock density creates more hoof action to press seeds into the soil.

All these methods will have varying amounts of success depending on moisture and time. New seedlings, once established, are competing with the existing plants present in the pasture so there may be a need to reduce this completion until the new plants get a good foothold.

Final thought: Trying to bring a pasture back when it's overgrazed or has a low degree of productivity is challenging. It won't happen overnight, and will require a lot of patience.