

SHARP BROS. SEED CO.



ROTATIONAL GRAZING

There are several types of rotational grazing systems. These systems have certain advantages over yearlong grazing. For this example we will work with a simple two-pasture rotational system. For ease of management, it is better to try and make the pastures equal in size if their production levels are equal.

Using the above example of a 640-acre of pasture, we now split the pasture into two 320-acre tracts with cross fencing. In order to achieve the benefits of rotational grazing, one pasture should be grazed while the other is in a state of rest. Important things happen while a pasture is being rested, including leaf growth, root growth, and plant reproduction. All of these functions are necessary to maintain a healthy, vigorous stand of grass that is weed-free.

Another benefit of the rest period in irrigated pastures is a reduction in soil compaction. Rest irrigated pastures during and after irrigation until the top several inches of the soil are dry. Soil compaction can also occur if animals are left in the pasture during and after major storms. Soil becomes compacted when it is inundated with water and heavy traffic or trampling at the same time. This compaction reduces or eliminates the soil's structure, which has natural channels that carry nutrients, water and air to the root systems of plants.

If a pasture does not have a sufficient rest period, the effects of overgrazing eventually take place. Overgrazing happens when animals are left in one place too long, continually eating the plant re-growth, and not allowing the plant to regain the material lost to grazing. Grasses then become weak, which allows weeds to establish in pasture areas. Therefore, judging the proper amount of rest needed in a rotational grazing system is crucial for a successful, sustainable grazing system. So how do you know when rest is needed?

JUDGING THE GRASS FOR SUFFICIENT REST

These minimum stubble heights are what should be standing on the ground when animals are moved out of an area. The pasture area will probably never have that "just mowed" look where all plants are equal in height. But the majority of the plants in a given area should be at or above the recommended height. The area should then be rested until at least double the amount of stubble listed is present. Depending on the season precipitation, climate and the type of forage present, the rest period can be anywhere between 15 days (with irrigation) and 90 days, if in a drought year with no irrigation water. The key to a successful rotation system is observation.

COMPLEX ROTATIONAL SYSTEMS

As stated earlier, rotational grazing systems with more pastures containing fewer acres are more complex and productive if used properly. The productivity increase initially is really and increase in harvest efficiency. The result is that the animals move away from their comfort zone areas like the barn and water tank, to areas at the edges of the pasture. Plants are thereby grazed, that previously may not have been used. For more information and technical assistance contact your local NRCS office.

Table 6 lists minimum stubble heights for a few of our common types of grasses.

Table 6	
Forage: Minimum stubble height	Inches
Crested wheatgrass (most soil types)	2
Western wheatgrass (clay or loam)	3
Tall wheatgrass (wet meadow site)	6
Switchgrass (sandy soil)	6
Little bluestem (loam)	4
Sideoats grama (loam)	3
Blue grama (loam/clay)	2
Smooth brome (most soils)	3