

Deferred Grazing

irrigated pasture ungrazed during fall permits plant regrowth

C. R. Horton

Irrigated pastures as a source of summer feed excel any forage crop, except possibly, alfalfa.

During the period of lush growth the carrying capacity of good irrigated pastures may exceed two animal units per acre month with the average somewhere between one and two units. Between five and 10 acres of these same pastures are required to maintain one mature animal per month during the late fall and winter months. The amount of feed that can be grazed during this period is almost nil.

Ranchers in Merced County have been trying to produce feed on irrigated pastures that can be grazed off during the fall and winter. Several reasons make such grazing desirable:

1. With the growing popularity of using pasture in place of feeding hay, many farmers are planting more pasture and are fattening a few steers.

2. Small land owners do not have large acreages of mountain or slough pasture which could be used during the period when irrigated pastures are dormant. They are dependent upon the irrigated pasture for the entire year.

3. Many farmers are raising dairy replacement heifers and need plenty of high quality roughage during the winter.

Deferred grazing of irrigated pastures necessitates leaving the pasture ungrazed—beginning about September 1st—until growth stops completely or is slowed up by killing frosts. This allows three or four months' growth to accumulate on the plants before grazing begins. Usually pastures are grazed from about January 1st until all growth is eaten down or until growth starts in the spring.

Letting the pasture mature enables most of the plant species to reseed the pasture. This helps improve the pasture where bare spots may have occurred.

It is probable that no extra feed is obtained from the pasture by winter grazing and the period of nongrazing or nonproductiveness is merely shifted from the winter months to the fall. To do this the farmer may require other pasture he can use during this nongrazing period. Management practices and no overstocking of the farm can arrange to allow the pasture to go ungrazed during the fall months. Probably this will mean the building of extra fences and the cutting of the pasture into smaller fields.

In evaluating this method of grazing irrigated pastures it is necessary to consider the various plants now grown. The basic pasture plant in Merced County is alfalfa which makes good growth from September until frost. The tops are killed by frost and after the plants stand a while the rains knock the leaves to the ground, leaving only the stems standing. These stems are eaten down before spring growth begins. Most of the leaves that have fallen on the ground will be eaten if the cattle are left on the pasture.

Ladino clover is very important in irrigated pastures as it grows well during the fall and can stand more frost than alfalfa. It is readily eaten by stock but it does not appear to be quite as palatable as narrow leaf birdsfoot trefoil during the winter period. Severe frost will kill the tops and much fodder may be lost.

Narrow leafed birdsfoot trefoil makes good growth during the early fall. It will stand even colder weather than Ladino clover. When protected by Dallis grass or other cover it will even keep on growing during the winter months, if weather is not too severe. This legume appears to be the most relished plant in the winter grazed pasture. Cattle and sheep will eat it down to the ground and keep it there. Since it grows slowly even during the spring and summer many farmers feel they get little feed from it. When the pasture is not grazed after September 1st, the plant runners may reach the extreme length of two feet and can be found nearly as tall as Dallis grass, which tends to raise and hold up the birds-foot trefoil.

Dallis is perhaps the most important grass that should be used in a pasture for winter grazing. It makes good growth after September 1st and is readily grazed after the tops have been killed by frost. Some farmers think a chemical change takes place in the stalks making them sweeter and more palatable than during the growing season. With a heavy top growth, the leaves and stems at the ground level may actually continue to grow during a mild winter. At least they remain green and cattle will eat them back to the ground. The cattle appear to first graze off the seed heads before beginning on

the stems. A good growth of either narrow leafed birdsfoot trefoil or Ladino clover will tend to make the Dallis more palatable. In going after the legumes the cattle also eat some of the grass. It may be necessary to spray the Dallis grass with molasses to make it palatable if there are no legumes present.

The rye grasses both act as perennials under Merced County conditions and both make good growth after September 1st. They tend to form bunches. They are not apparently injured except by very heavy frost when the tips of the leaves become brown and dry. During warm spells they will put on a little growth. They start growing very early in the spring and with Ladino will give the bulk of the spring feed. Both grasses are readily eaten during the winter months.

Tall fescue makes good growth after September 1st. During this period, as well as during the summer time, it forms a bunch which may become quite large if not mowed or grazed down to the ground. The seed stocks are not very palatable and are quite stiff, thus apparently discouraging the cattle from eating the clump by forming what may be described as a pin-cushion. If heavily grazed, tall fescue will be eaten to the ground and the clumps will be only a few inches high, not too different from Dallis grass. The clumping habit is very objectionable from a management point of view. Some farmers complain of breaking mowing machines trying to cut the clumps. It is very difficult to run a wheel tractor and wheel equipment over the pasture. This clumping probably can be eliminated or at least reduced by heavily grazing, frequent mowing during the summer when the seed stalks first appear and are left by the cattle, or by increasing the rate of seeding from about three to 10 pounds per acre, thus forming a continuous sod of fescue rather than individually spaced clumps. Renovating the pasture by disking would eliminate the clumps for a few years without materially hurting the pasture.

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Heifers, dry cows and beef cows and calves grazing Orchard grass pasture.

300

pounds of single superphosphate has been found to be adequate to maintain a high amount of growth. Barnyard manure has also been found to be beneficial when applied at the rate of about 10 tons per acre. An application of nitrogen just prior to the irrigation-about September 1st-would be of benefit in stimulating growth of the grasses.

After the pasture has been grazed off it will be advisable to spread the cow droppings that will have accumulated. In some fields the accumulation of droppings has made them look like feed lots. A spike tooth harrow will do a fair job of spreading the droppings.

C. R. Horton § Farm Advisor, Merced County.