

The Fenceline

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Good Enough

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Are your pastures and grazing management good enough? What does that even mean? I think we often tend to bounce between the two not-so-helpful extremes of complacency and perfectionism. A more measurable, goal oriented approach may prove more helpful. Here are some general thoughts about what "good enough" might look like in your pastures and livestock. Bear in mind that every situation is unique, but at least this may give you a place to start...

- **Pasture condition and lifespan.** On ground you own, cool-season perennial grasses should last 8-10 years before needing any significant renovation because of declining plant density or productivity. Legumes, of course, require reseeding on a more frequent basis to maintain a significant presence in a pasture--typically about every 3 years for clover. Good benchmarks to help evaluate your stand include 1) maintain 70% cover with with desirable, live plants, 2) dominant forages include at least one grass and one legume, 3) both bunch and sod-forming species are present, 4) >60% of plants show healthy green growth (commensurate with weather). Evaluating pastures over time may help you head off issues before they impact stand longevity. In my

opinion, a complete stand replacement should be a once-in-a-generation thing or close to it. The exceptions to this might be heavy-use areas of the farm, or farms like a grazing dairy or grass-finishing operation where high animal performance requirements demand high yield and quality from pasture. Another exception might be pastures with a high proportion of orchardgrass or other species that are a little less hardy under certain grazing systems. Rented ground is a little different situation; in most cases any real renovation or replacement is nearly impossible to justify. In this case I think the best you can do is to keep an eye on pasture condition and try to use grazing management to make sure you're doing the best with what you've got to work with. If your pasture is consistently weak or overtaken by weeds, it is time to take a close look at the fertility, as well as the intensity and frequency at which your pastures are grazed. You may also be able to use some temporary or semi-permanent fencing or water to improve manure distribution and forage utilization.

- **Soil fertility.** pH should be at 5.8-7 for grasses; 6.2-7 for legumes. Phosphorus and potassium should be at least in the medium range (on a Virginia Tech soil analysis) to ensure those nutrients are not limiting. Because nitrogen is transient, there is no practical way to measure this other than to confirm healthy green growth when growing conditions are favorable. If legumes comprise below about 20% of the pasture sward, nitrogen will need to be applied if extra growth is needed (e.g. fall stockpiling). While soil organic matter is important, many people get too caught up on trying to reach the "right" amount of organic matter. I see productive, healthy pastures across a range of organic matter contents. In my opinion, manage for the health of the plants and the organic matter will follow. Overall, soil fertility in a well managed grazing system is pretty stable; once soil fertility is optimum, it shouldn't need any added nutrients for at least 4-5 years and potentially much longer (spacing out hay rings or rolling out hay will really help with this). The one exception is

again nitrogen, which will need to be applied annually if stockpiling is desired, and anytime you are establishing a new stand of grass.

- **Goals for cattle.** A good overall herd health and performance goal is "*calf crop weaned per cow exposed*". A goal of 89-93% calf crop weaned per cow exposed should be attainable for many herds, and will require attention to those factors which impact reproductive performance and calf health. For more information see: https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/400/400-791/400-791_pdf.pdf. Contrary to popular belief, weaning weights are not a major factor in farm profitability, however, a reasonable goal for most spring calving herds would be for the calves to have an average weight per day of age of at least 2.75 pounds. This growth level would equate to an average weaning weight of 575 pounds for a seven month old calf. For most fall calving herds, a weight per day of age of 2.5 pounds or a weaning weight of 525 pounds at seven months would be an acceptable goal. What about calf gains? Generally, weaned calves on toxic fescue pasture should maintain average daily gains of 1-1.5 lbs in spring & fall, 0.5-0.75 lbs. during summer. Non-toxic pastures should support average daily gains of 1.5-2 lbs. during spring and fall ,1.0-1.25 lbs. in summer. The addition of abundant clover (particularly red clover) to any of these situations usually accounts for around a 0.5 lb. bump in ADG. Gains on grass also depend a lot on forage availability and stocking rate. Making sure calves are moved to new pasture before grass is grazed below 4" will ensure that forage availability and intake rates stay high. As for stocking rates, rates approaching 2 acres/calf are going to allow the animal to select a higher quality diet.
- **Goals for sheep.** A couple of good benchmarks for operations that are generally pasture based are 1) 175% lamb crop weaned per ewe exposed, and 2) 10% or less lamb morbidity--morbidity being defined as poor performing, lightweight lambs due to parasitism or other metabolic factors.

- **Productivity and hay feeding.** Most pastures in Virginia should yield between 2-4 tons of dry matter/acre, but who is going to attempt to measure this? A better indicator of pasture productivity would be to calculate the number of grazing days that it provides. Some people will go so far as to calculate this on a field by field basis, but in general it is helpful to know what length of grazing season your whole farm is providing on an annual basis. This is only meaningful, however, when coupled with animal performance information as well as your yearly feed bill. Feed cost is the number one variable impacting profitability of livestock operations. A good, profitable goal for Virginia seems to be about 270-300 days of grazing per year, though more or less may fit you better depending on hay costs and land availability.



Pasture-finished Beef

Online Workshop

August 11, 12, and 13 from 7 – 9 PM

Forage finished beef is of growing consumer and producer interest. Opportunities to direct market a higher value product appeals to producers. Healthier meat from animals raised on pasture appeals to consumers, and the ability to improve environmental outcomes appeals to both. Getting adequate growth to reach a “finished” state and addressing market issues can sometimes challenge, however. This workshop on forage finishing features expertise from Greg Halich (UKY ag economics) and Ed Rayburn (WVU forage specialist), long-time producers and marketers of forage finished beef. In addition to these guests, a producer panel will offer insights from the full-time producers’ perspective. Join us August 11, 12, and 13 from 7 – 9 PM EDT for these highly educational sessions.

This **FREE** educational workshop will be three concurrent sessions, 7-9 pm EDT August 11-13th. Participants will receive a pasture-finished beef production manual and copies of all presentation materials. Hard copies of materials will be mailed to participants, as well as electronic versions. To register, visit: <https://vaforages.org/pasture-finish-beef/>

Questions? Feel free to contact me.

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