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**Grazing Livestock in Mud Season**

***Cornell Cooperative Extension shares strategies to help take advantage of early season grazing on wet pastures***

*By Amy Barkley, Livestock and Beginning Farm Specialist with the SWNY Dairy, Livestock, and Field Crops Program*

SOUTHWEST, NEW YORK (May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021) – Cornell Cooperative Extension’s Southwest New York Dairy, Livestock and Field Crops Program (SWNYDLFC) knows that while pastures are greening up nicely, damage can be made to them by the hooves of livestock, especially if they are wet. However, there are ways to decrease potential injury to plants and compaction of soil while still taking advantage of this nutrient-rich feed source.

In many parts of Southwest NY, farmers are in the middle of what is affectionately (or not so affectionately) known as “mud season”. In fields with clay-type soil and/or poor drainage, wet ground can stick around until early summer. For farmers with grazing livestock, this is unfortunate since the spring flush of cool season grass growth is the largest of the season, and not grazing it can leave money on the table. However, management strategies can play a large role in when you can get out onto a wet pasture and not damaging it when you do.

The greatest damage to a wet pasture is caused by grazing livestock punching up the ground. The relatively small surface area of a hoof compared to the animal’s relatively large body weight means that each step that creature takes results in a significant amount of weight in a small area. When that animal steps through the sod, not only does it cause damage to the plants, but it also compacts the soil. Compacted soil loses its porous structure, keeping a wet pasture wetter longer. It also puts the plants growing in that area at a disadvantage. Plants perform better when a soil’s porous structure allows for water and air movement as well as spaces for roots to grow.

While wet pastures are a thorn in the side of some, there are management strategies to help reduce compaction and plant damage while still taking advantage of early season forage. Grazing lighter animal groups, such as a smaller species or younger stock can help reduce the extent of compaction. Drastically decreasing the stocking density can help get some forage from the pasture, but the lower number of animals means less of an impact to the soil. This will not prevent hooves from sinking, but will result in fewer repeated punches.

The best management strategy for pasture health and longevity is to not graze until it's dry enough to do so. However, sometimes this is not possible. Wet weather results in little drying of the soil, which may make pastures that are otherwise grazable too wet for a few days. Let them dry for 3-5 days before turning livestock out.

When waiting for an early grazed wet pasture to regrow, increasing the time the animals are off pasture allows more time for damaged roots and shoots to recover. To avoid the risk of livestock punching up the ground, there may be an opportunity to take hay off a wet pasture, but careful consideration needs to be made regarding potential damage by the tractor and haying equipment. Lighter equipment with wider tires that can float more easily over the ground surface is recommended here.

While the management strategies listed above can be successful, they can be further aided by the following considerations. Patchy pastures or pastures with less-than-optimal forage growth will likely benefit from a soil test and adjusting the pH and fertility based on the results. Optimized soil nutrition allows for the growth of desired species, filling in patchy or weedy pastures, and increasing the density of the sod (stems and roots). In wetter pastures, sod-forming species are desirable, since their sod forms a mat which is less easily damaged by grazing livestock. Species such as Kentucky bluegrass, tall fescue, and bermudagrass are good choices for wet areas. Some seed companies have pasture mixes that are designed to thrive in wet soils and build a dense sod.

The recommendation when grazing is to take half, leave half. Plants like to have a balance of roots and shoots and grazing too low means that the plant will kill off some of its root system to maintain the balance. To keep the greatest amount of root structure, which stabilizes soil, graze conservatively. On pastures that are typically wet at the beginning of the season, leaving 4" – 6" of residual at the end of the season can help give a jump-start to forage growth in the spring while maintaining a dense root mass.

With these management tips in mind, it's possible to successfully harvest forage from wet pastures.

For more information, contact Livestock and Beginning Farm Specialist, Amy Barkley, at [amb544@cornell.edu](mailto:amb544@cornell.edu) or (716) 640 – 0844.

SWNYDLFC is a partnership between Cornell University and the CCE Associations of Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, and Steuben counties. Their team includes Katelyn Walley-Stoll, Farm Business Management (716-640-0522); Joshua Putman, Field Crops (716-490-5572); Alycia Drwencke, Dairy Management (517-416-0386) and Amy Barkley, Livestock Management (716-640-0844). CCE is an employer and educator recognized for valuing AA/EEO, Protected Veterans, and Individuals with Disabilities and provides equal program and employment opportunities.

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(1 photo included)



*(Photo Caption)* Livestock and Beginning Farm Specialist, Amy Barkley, discusses ways to avoid damage to soil and pasture plants when grazing in wet spring pastures.