

DO'S AND DON'TS IN GRAZING ALFALFA

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I want to discuss some of the issues in a talk I presented nearly twenty years ago. At that point we had been grazing Alfalfa about eight years and made some general remarks about the concerns I had at the time. I will look at these as presented then and how the thoughts may have changed.

Bloat – *Past comment, I don't consider bloat to be a major problem.*

-- Right and wrong. Not considering bloat as a serious potential problem is asking for trouble. Bloat can cause disastrous consequences if not managed for, and it will likely be fast, before the landowner has time to correct the problem. Management is the key, you can manage around bloat quite successfully.

Stand Life – *Past comment, grazing hasn't seemed to shorten stand life.*

-- Again right and wrong. Although proper rotational systems will maintain stand life close to hay systems, the potential for errors is great. Small errors, grazing to long, on wet soils, to late in the season, etc. will greatly shorten stand life.

Gain – *Past comment, one of alfalfa's strong points is summer grazing, making gains of 1.5 to 2 pounds per day possible.*

-- Still correct, maybe even more in some years.

Fertility – *Past comment, fertilize at half the normal hay rate.*

Wrong, in a rapid grazing rotation, manure is spread fairly uniformly. We have found over the years that very little annual fertilizer is needed. Soils tests may be more critical in this situation than normal pastures, to prevent over fertilizing.

Shade – *Past comment, shade has to be provided during the summer months.*

Shade is great and should be provided if possible. However, it should not be the factor that determines if you are going to graze alfalfa. Several research studies since my first article

have indicated that although beneficial, shade is not necessary for good gains.

Insects – *Past comment, you must spray for insects, i.e. weevils.*

This is partially true, you will likely have to spray some of your paddocks, but a fast rotation in the spring will do a pretty good job controlling weevils on at least a third of the area.

In the past I considered grazing alfalfa to be a profitable enterprise. I believe this even more so today. With higher fertilizer and land prices, low cost of gain on as few acres as possible has the potential for even a greater affect on profitability.