

September 11, 2026

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Taking The Last Bite

Rainfall has varied widely this year, with drastic changes noted just a few miles apart. The eastern part of the state has received good rainfall, while west continues to deal with various levels of drought. Approaching the end of the growing season, consideration needs to be given to how much can we graze grass plants, particularly in those areas where rainfall has created lush fall growth on cool season grass. Let's see if we can find the time when it is appropriate to take the last bite.

Pastures often contain a variety of cool-season and warm-season grasses, and these grasses have markedly different grow patterns. Cool-season grass has two growing seasons, one in early spring and another in early fall. We are currently in the window of fall growth commonly referred to as the fall "green up." Conversely, warm-season grasses grow later in the season during the summer and do not get another green up in fall. Knowing these growth patterns and having the ability to mix in annual plants, crop residues and stored forages; allows the opportunity to give rest to plants going into winter.

It is very tempting to graze fresh, green cool season grasses now. However, caution should be taken to not overgraze this green-up, because the cool-season grasses are initiating new shoots. During the fall green-up, cool-season grasses are storing energy reserves to ensure health through the dormant season and vigor next spring when the growing season starts again.

In addition, many of these fall-initiated shoots will overwinter and begin growing again next year. If these shoots are overgrazed, the growing point can be removed and will not continue to grow next season creating thin and less thrifty stands next season. Cool-season grasses should not be grazed shorter than four to six inches of plant height. Another benefit of leaving sufficient plant height into the dormant season is for the soil. Leaving this residue will protect the soil surface from erosion and optimize snow capture.

So, when is the right time for the grazing animal to take the last bite? Simply using the calendar and average frost dates, says now is the window to consider removing animals from pastures to allow the solar panels (leaves) to collect sunlight energy and send carbohydrate reserves into the plant batteries (roots). Since no year is "average" it is best to evaluate rainfall, plant growth, projected temperatures and balance other available forage in your situation. Don't forget that grass can be utilized after photosynthesis has been shut down by a killing frost, so grazing later into fall/winter is not "wasting grass".

The key question for many producers is whether to use growth this fall or leave it for later. Grazing now can relieve pressure on other feed sources, but it comes with trade-offs. Grass plants need time in the fall to rebuild root reserves and set buds for spring growth. Over-utilization in September or October can weaken stands and reduce vigor next year.