

PRESCRIBED GRAZING HORSES

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Conservation Practice Fact Sheet



Horses have a reputation for severely overgrazing pastures; however, this tends to be a management problem — in most cases the horse has been continuously grazed or left in the pasture too long. A rotational grazing program is highly desirable for horses. Normally if horses are rotated to fresh pastures they will eat the tops off the grass and not overgraze. When the animals are removed from a pasture or paddock on a timely basis (ideally every three to four days) and the grazed pasture is allowed to regrow to a certain level before being grazed

again, the longevity of the pasture will be greatly increased.

Grazing Management and Fencing

Electric fencing is very effective in controlling horses; however, be aware of behavior differences between horses and other livestock. Horses need a little more room than other livestock—especially if there is not a defined pecking order or if one or two horses are dominant—and they need room to run. Try making the horse paddocks longer and narrower

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than for the cattle. Be careful in making them too narrow as some horses are quite sensitive to electric fencing and will be “jumpy” while in the paddock. Horses will hesitate to even walk across fences that are lying on the ground.

There are types of electric fencing designed for horses. Some people hesitate to use high tensile wire for horses as it is not as visible and there have been instances of horses taking a limb off when running into the wire. A precaution in the use of high tensile wire is to not tighten the wire—leave some “give” in the fence. High tensile wire is not intended to control animals through physical control so tightness is not an issue. Simply keeping the wire at a certain distance off the ground is important. For horses wire is probably best at height of somewhere around 36-40 inches. One wire is adequate and is helpful in that animals will graze underneath one wire and may not with multiple wires. In some cases when training horses to electric fence a second wire is useful at a height of 20-30 inches to keep the animal from grazing too far underneath the wire. In this case the horse raises its head and the head is completely underneath the fence, creating a problem.

Temporary electric fencing (polywire or polytape) can be used very effectively. Persons with a small acreage would probably benefit from using the temporary fencing rather than permanently dividing into paddocks.

Manure Distribution

Horse manure has a fertility value of something like 17-4-17 and can contribute to nutrient recycling. The problem is manure distribution. Horses tend to deposit manure in areas they aren't grazing. This tends to be areas that have been undergrazed or spots not grazed down close enough. Therefore, horse owners tend to drag areas to spread manure and/or they will clip pastures to get those areas back under vegetative control. The areas where manure is deposited tends to be areas higher in fertility to begin with or areas with more forage growth. This potential problem is worse on small parcels of land with a few horses and necessitates keeping pastures vegetative (for example, small

pastures may have to be routinely clipped to prevent spot grazing).

Grass Founder

Some horses are prime candidates for grass founder. Simply dividing the acreage into four pastures and moving the animals to a fresh pasture with grass 6–10 inches tall, then moving them to another after a week or when the grass is down to 3-4 inches, would be better for the horse's health and the pasture's.

As indicated above, prescribed grazing presents an option to prevent grass founder. Many horse owners feel that they cannot keep horses on pasture because of the danger of grass founder. There is recent evidence shown in British research on grass founder indicating that “fructans” had been identified as causing the disorder. When horses are rotationally grazed they do not eat very young pasture regrowth, which is high in fructans, and are therefore less likely to suffer founder.

Fructans (or fructosans) are water-soluble carbohydrates (polysaccharides). Temperate (cool-season) grasses tend to be higher in fructans than warm season grasses. Grass regrows within a very few days after being grazed down; under continuous grazing, the horse is back to a grazed spot three to four days later eating that very lush forage. The British research suggests that if grass is allowed to regrow longer, the level of fructans is lowered, thereby reducing the risk of grass founder.

Fructans accumulate in the base of the plant — the lower couple of inches. Horses can eat pasture closer to the ground since they have two sets of teeth, as compared to cattle which have only lower teeth and eat by bringing the forage into their mouth with their tongue. In addition, horses tend to eat the upper part of plants until they start spot-grazing, and then they eat the very lush young regrowth if they are still on the pasture as it regrows. This implies that horse owners can decrease the ingestion of fructans by horses on pasture by ensuring more-than-adequate forage availability and removing them as soon as they begin spot grazing.