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### Successful Horse Grazing

Last week I attended the Livestock Learning Roadshow in Holton to listen to Jim Gerrish speak about livestock grazing topics. Someone in the crowd asked about multi-species grazing and specifically included horses in the discussion. The response basically said that horses (*all equids really*) are a different animal when it comes to grazing, a point that I wholeheartedly agree with. Today let's take a look at some basics of pasture considerations for horses.

Many times, a call comes into the Extension office to “get better pasture” for horses. When questioned on the animals to land ratio, it often is something like “I’ve got three horses and thee acres”, a situation doomed from the start. No one really wants to hear they need to get rid of two of those horses or triple the landmass to make this have any chance of success, but it is often the solution. An acreage will be over-grazed because landowners simply have too many horses for the amount of land they own. Horse owners need to have a basic understanding of how horses graze, the requirements they have and the amount of land needed, before grazing horses successfully.

The major impacts of overgrazing are reduced plant production and increased bare ground. This can lead to weed problems, wind and water erosion, soil compaction and reduced soil fertility. Altogether it likely means less available forage for livestock and may even create nutritional deficiencies for the animals that are grazing the area. There are three questions horse owners should ask themselves to determine if their land is being overused. They are:

1. Is the productivity of your grass starting to decline or dominate grass species changing?
2. Do you notice an increase in the amount of bare ground and/or weeds?
3. Are you buying excessive amounts of feed to supplement horses year-round?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, you likely need to evaluate the number of horses your land can support. To help prevent overgrazing, horse owners need to understand the horse's requirements. These include exercise, shelter for inclement weather, fresh water (8-12 gallons/day) and feed – about 30 pounds of grass or hay per day. Another thing about horses to note is that they are continuous grazers. This means that if grass/forage is presented in front of them, they will eat. Basic strategies to protect your grass include:

- Rotational grazing, where existing pastures are cross-fenced into smaller paddocks to rotate horses through; or
- Limit grazing, where horses are let out to graze for short periods, one or two times daily. Additionally, you may consider developing exercise paddocks, for exercise only.

In devising the grazing system that fits your situation, it is important to remember that timing of grazing and REST are two critical components. Grazing systems can work to prevent overgrazing and, in some instances, increase grazing capacity. Landowners can rotationally graze on any size & scale. Two, three or four pastures/paddocks are better than one pasture that is continuously grazed season long. Use electric fence and polywire to divide pasture into smaller areas. Make sure horses are familiar with an electric fence system before getting too elaborate with the design. Water systems tends to be a limiting factor.

The biggest thing to keep in mind is that the size of the acreage will limit the number of horses that can be kept, no matter the rotational system. Also, type and quality of forage on that land influences the number of horses. All of these things need to be considered, before investment in the animal. For more information on this subject as well and other horse related issues, contact your local Extension office or visit the Horse Resource website: <http://www.extension.org/horses>