



Forage Management

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Horse Pasture Management

The horse industry is growing throughout West Virginia, but maintaining a healthy, high-quality pasture for horses is a challenge. By nature, horses are “patch” grazers. They tend to graze some areas very closely and leave other areas almost untouched.

Adding cattle, sheep, or goats to the pasture rotation greatly improves the pasture situation. These other species will “even out” the grazing problems of the horses. If adding other species is not an option, then horse owners must be willing to clip or mow pastures more often to keep them more vegetative and productive.

Sound pasture management is critical for maintaining healthy, vigorous sod that benefits the horse, the owner, and the environment.

Pasture soil should be tested every two to three years to provide a baseline for tracking changes in pH and fertility. Maintain pH between 6.0 and 6.2 for grass-legume pastures by applying lime according to the soil test. Phosphorus and potassium should be maintained in the high range. Soil test kits are available from WVU Extension offices.

Drag and clip pastures to distribute dung piles and encourage uniform grazing. If land area is limited, grazing must be controlled to maintain healthy pastures. You should graze four or more pastures in rotation.

Resting pastures allows plants to replenish food reserves. Let pastures regrow to a height of 8 to 10 inches. In the spring when cool-season grasses are growing rapidly, rest periods will be

shorter. In midsummer when plant growth is slower, rest periods will be longer.

Since horses tend to graze some areas closer than others, rotate horses to a fresh pasture when heavily grazed areas are down to 2 to 4 inches. Clip ungrazed areas of the pasture.

Feed hay in a sacrifice area to avoid overgrazing pasture during the winter and summer. Hoof action can seriously damage established sods during wet periods. Place horses in the sacrifice area and feed hay when the soil is soft.

In some cases, it is advisable to establish a permanent perimeter fence and cross-fence with temporary fencing until a suitable pasture layout is found. Long and narrow or odd-shaped pastures are not uniformly grazed. Pastures should contain similar forage species, soil types, slopes, and aspects.

Ideally, each pasture should contain water and shade. Allow 600 to 1,000 square feet per horse of well-drained area located near the barn. In most cases, a rock pad is needed to keep the area from becoming mud.

Electrified polytape can control grazing. To be effective, it must be electrified at all times. For more information, contact your county’s WVU Extension Office.

