Pasture Wise and Paddock Smart

Pastures and paddocks can provide a healthy diet and safe exercise area for horses. A well-managed grass pasture can meet the nutritional requirements of most horses. This benefit can be maximized by using a rotational grazing system. Conversely, poorly managed, overgrazed pastures or exercise areas can negatively affect horse health, and potentially human health as well. On de-nuded pasture land and paddocks, soil sediments, manure, fertilizers, and pesticides can all be moved during a heavy rainfall into surface and groundwater sources. Not only can these pollutants impact horses, they may also affect people who live downstream from the horse area.

Horses benefit from grazing high quality pastures. Grazing the plants at their vegetative stage (before going to seed) will provide higher nutritional value forage. For cool season grasses, this stage could be maintained by grazing when the plants reach between 8-10 inches in height. Resting the pastures during the grazing season will allow the re-growth needed to graze them again. Moving the horses out of the field when the grass is 3-4 inches high will allow faster re-growth and will also help increase the life span of the stand and reduce overgrazing.

Grazing plants too short will interfere with the dry matter intake of the horse. It may also cause horses to ingest soil and become sickly. Having shorter plants will allow more weeds to invade the pastures, increasing the chance for consumption of toxic plants and may be engaging in a more costly, less environment-friendly weed control program.

Management: Resting pastures is critical! Recovery time for grasses ranges from 10 to as many as 60 days, depending upon season, weather, and soil characteristics. Generally expect to wait at least 14 days for grasses to re-grow to grazing height in spring, and 30 or more days in summer. A good rule of thumb for grazing in New York is to avoid exceeding 7 days on any one paddock. To do this, divide your total pasture area into a minimum of 5 paddocks, and rotate animals to a new paddock at least once a week. This system will allow each paddock to rest for 28 days. In springtime when grasses are growing quickly, you may need to move horses through the rotation faster or mow the grass in order to prevent plants from getting too mature and unpalatable before they've been grazed. If you make hay, you may choose instead to withhold 1/2 of your pasture from your grazing system so that you can harvest a first cutting from it. After re-growth, this area may be added back into your rotation system. Ideally, a paddock should be mowed as soon as possible after every time animals are removed and rotated on to the next paddock. If mowing is delayed for many days, new re-growth that occurs in the interim will be clipped off and wasted. Soil test pastures to determine the need for fertilizer and lime, and follow recommendations. If pasture is new or has not received lime and fertilizer for many years, you may wish to test for 2-3 years in a row to establish a healthy fertility level. After that, a test every 3 years is sufficient. Remember that if soil pH is too low, any fertilizer you apply may not be accessible to the grass, resulting in a waste of money!

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