

Management Of Intensive Grazing On Alfalfa Based Pasture



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The fear of bloat has prevented many grazers from introducing alfalfa to pasture based systems. Alfalfa can provide a superior yield of highly nutritious feed at a low cost because of its capability to fix atmospheric nitrogen.

There are other bloat free legumes, but none yield as high or have the quality of alfalfa. Alfalfa can be used successfully in grazing systems; it just requires astute management. Many farmers graze alfalfa successfully and have done so for years. There are some important factors to consider when managing an alfalfa based pasture system and this article aims to discuss factors necessary for a successful alfalfa-grazing program.

Management to reduce the incidence of frothy bloat really means trying to balance the amount of leaf vs. stem material cattle are consuming. When only lush leaf material is offered, the situation can be dangerous. Typically the lushest and least fibrous material is available one to three days after weather transitions from cool to hot as plants grow very rapidly. It also appears that higher risk is in the morning when there is dew on plants. Other times of risk are when summer day length is at its maximum or following a frost in the fall.

Strip grazing so that animals will consume middle and lower portions of the plant is a successful technique to manage bloat when grazing alfalfa. Offering alternative forage aside from just alfalfa also works. This may mean having some grass based pasture available during high-risk periods. Once alfalfa is 20 to 30% bloom the risk diminishes greatly, however quality can then also be limiting. Grazing alfalfa continuously can be risky, as young plants start re-growing within a pasture and cattle may select for those. Other methods of managing bloat during periods of danger are to cut the plant material and allow it to wilt for twenty four hours and then allow animals to consume it. Cattle should be moved in the afternoon with a full stomach after the dew has receded from plants. Never move cattle into a lush alfalfa pasture when they are hungry. Do not overgraze a paddock

before moving onto a lush new pasture as this will create large nutritional swings and increase bloat risk. Understand that even if you 'waste' 50% of alfalfa, it still provides better nutrition than grass and fixes free nitrogen. If your farm is not organically managed, there are products available to put in watering systems that reduce the risk of frothy bloat for animals on alfalfa pasture.

In conclusion, when managed appropriately, alfalfa based pastures can provide a high plane of nutrition, and be implemented successfully as part of your farm's grazing plan.

Popp, J. D., McCaughey, W. P., Cohen, R. D. H., McAllister, T. A. and Majak, W. 2000. Enhancing pasture productivity with alfalfa: A review. *Can. J. Plant Sci.* 80: 513-519.

