

## Rotational Grazing

What is rotational grazing? As I talk to people across the province about grazing management I have come to realize that rotational grazing means different things to different people. The dictionary definition of rotation is to change or alternate in a particular sequence; regular variation. To a crop producer, rotation means a different crop or sequence of crops in a field over a number of years. When we talk about rotation in relation to grazing, the most important factor is the state of the grass growth, and the rotation refers to the movement of the livestock from one paddock to another during the grazing season. The guiding principals of rotational grazing are to give the grass crop every opportunity to grow and produce forage for the livestock.

Grass growth varies during the season with rapid growth in May and June and then much slower growth during July and August when the temperatures are higher and moisture is less available. The concept behind rotational grazing is to harvest the grass quickly and then give the forage time to recover and re-grow. This is accomplished by giving the livestock enough grass for the prescribed feeding period and then moving them to a new field. From a production standpoint, the more frequent these moves the more productive your pastures will be. The maximum length of time in a paddock should be 5 days. Why 5 days? Grass starts to re-grow five days after it is harvested. Think of how long a hay field takes to green up after being cut? Usually in 5-6 days there is new growth started, in a pasture field this new growth is candy to the livestock and they quickly re-graze it. This re-grazing depletes the root reserves of the plant reducing the plant vigour and reducing subsequent growth.

An effective rotational grazing system will have the livestock moving to fresh grass every 1-3 days. If you extend beyond this time frame there will be reduced performance by both the livestock and the forage. Think of the pasture field as a feed bunk, would you expect livestock to perform well if the feed bunk was only filled every five days? I don't think so, we know that fresh feed encourages consumption and increased consumption means increased performance.

For each group of livestock that you have on pasture there should be a minimum of 10 paddocks. This is the minimum number to give the grass an opportunity to recover from the grazing. 20 paddocks will go along way to encouraging increased animal intake and 30 paddocks will allow you to realize the full potential of both the pasture and the livestock that are grazing on that pasture. This may seem like a lot of paddocks but with the use of electric fence and some temporary/portable fence it does not need to be an insurmountable task. Livestock trained to electric fence and accustomed to moving every 1-2 days to fresh grass will meet you at the gate for their next move. Pasture managers who use an effective rotational system find that they have increased carrying capacity, grass growth throughout the grazing season and dramatically reduced need for feeding hay.

Rotational grazing means fresh grass every 1-3 days and a sufficient rest period for the grass to grow to the optimum grazing height (20-40 cm). Rotational grazing at this level

will provide the most high quality forage at the least cost. For more information on rotational grazing, see the websites listed below:

[www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/field/forages.html](http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/field/forages.html)

[www.ontarioforagecouncil.com](http://www.ontarioforagecouncil.com)

[www.foragebeef.ca](http://www.foragebeef.ca)

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