Managing Horses on Pasture

From: Pasture Management Guide for Livestock Producers,
Iowa State University Extension, Pierce Conservation District

Horses are forage consuming animals and must have a daily supply of roughage provided either as pasture or hay. Horses will graze up to 16 hours per day. A horse's normal pattern is to graze continuously for several hours, rest, and then continue grazing. Even if horse are fed grain and have access to high quality hay, they will continue to graze. Increased pasture forage availability will decrease grazing time. Horses graze less during very hot or cold weather. Young horses graze less than mature horses. Horses graze more in a group than as isolated individuals.

Horses are selective grazers, which affects the productivity of a pasture. Horses prefer to eat young, immature plants and will graze some areas of a pasture down to bare ground. In other parts of the pasture, they will allow plants to grow to full maturity, which lessens palatability and nutrient availability. This grazing pattern is often called spot or pattern grazing. Horses will not graze in areas where they defecate.

To maximize pasture and nutrient availability, a number of management techniques can be followed. Rotational grazing or limit grazing should limit the length of time horses are maintained on pastures. Limit grazing is limiting the amount of time a horse has access to a pasture. If adequate quantities of forage are available, a horse at maintenance can meet it dietary nutrient requirements with 4 to 5 hours of grazing.

It is very common to use electric fences to set up a rotational grazing system for horses. A rotational grazing system of 3 or 4 pastures is suitable for horses. Each pasture should be large enough to allow all the forage produced on it to be grazed in 1 to 7 days. In general, plants should be grazed to a height not less than 3 inches tall. If the pasture cannot be grazed to the recommended height, it should be mowed or made into hay. Following the 1 to 7 day grazing period, the pasture should have about a one-month rest for forage regrowth before horses are rotated back into it.

Stocking rate (the number of head divided by size of grazing area) will determine the number of days the pasture can be used. General recommendations for stocking rates per acre are difficult to give because the variation among forage species and forage density. However, in general, 1 acre of legume and grass pasture with good management and growing conditions can provide enough forage for 1 horse during the grazing season. With good rainfall or irrigation, less acreage may be required. If the stocking rate is not high enough, more spot grazing will occur, and the clipping of mature grasses will be necessary.

Additional management techniques frequently used with horse pastures include breaking up manure piles by dragging a chain link or spike tooth harrow over the pasture, and alternating or mixing cattle and horses because cattle will eat more of the mature grass that horses avoid.

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