

Use Moisture Wisely

Every time it rains on your pasture, some of the water is well used to support plant growth and some of the water is wasted. Fortunately, you control most of it.

When it rains, most of the water will either soak into the soil or run off the land. Some might puddle and stand for a while, eventually soaking in or evaporating. While runoff might help fill ponds, most of the time we want rain to soak into the soil.

Then, after it soaks in, the way the pasture has been managed greatly affects where that water goes. Some might leach through the profile out of reach of plant roots, some can evaporate, or it can support plant growth through root absorption and transpiration.

As you walk through your pastures, look straight down. How much green do you see? The more green leaves the better, both for capturing sunlight and for retaining and using rainfall. Hopefully, anything you see that is not green will be litter. Litter protects soil from erosion, improves water infiltration, and builds organic matter. Do you see any bare soil? Water runs off of and evaporates faster from bare soil. It is better to manage pastures so the land is covered with live plants and dead litter than to have any bare soil.

Try to limit how much land area cattle have access to graze at any one time, especially after a rain during the growing season. Grazing puts stress on plants so it lowers their rate of growth and reduces their water use efficiency by allowing more soil moisture to escape as evaporation instead of first going through the plant to support more growth. In areas affected by drought, it is particularly important to use as much of the rain as possible for pasture growth.

Grazing that maintains lots of green leaves and litter uses rain most efficiently for growth and, boy, can we use it.

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