

Chris Ramsey
Ag Column
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Pasture Slow to Recover

Many livestock owners have just recently stopped feeding hay and some are still keeping some hay out for livestock due to slow pasture growth. Grass has been unusually slow to grow this spring. Pasture growth is about a month behind where it has been in recent years.

The likely reason for this slow growth can be traced back to the very dry weather during March and early April. Following a mild winter, soil moisture was marginal in most areas across our region.

As the soil temperature warmed, the grass started to grow very slowly due to limited rain. In most cases, livestock consumed the limited growth, resulting in little if any excess growth. As the grass continued to grow and livestock continued to graze, root carbohydrates became depleted. With no rain and low root carbohydrates, pasture grasses likely lost part of their root system.

As livestock owners, we must remember that grass is a factory for carbohydrates which feed the root system. Photosynthesis is the basic process that allows the plant to absorb sunlight and utilize carbon dioxide to produce carbohydrates and oxygen. While this process is critical to our existence, it is also essential for the survival of the plant. Without healthy grass blades above ground to carry out photosynthesis, there is no food for the root system.

Finally, in mid to late April we began to get some rain. Most areas are now getting some regular rain, but our pastures are still marginal. Even though we are getting good rainfall, we haven't seen the expected response in our pastures. This is likely due to the carbohydrate levels being depleted in the root system of our grasses. The root systems of our pasture grasses are likely smaller as well. In the world of plants, there is a balance between the growth above ground and the root system. One cannot survive without the other. Our pastures must slowly rebuild their root systems to fully utilize the available moisture.

This situation of slow pasture growth also occurs when pastures are overgrazed. The result is the same when livestock are heavily stocked preventing the grass to grow to a healthy height. Without rest, pasture grasses gradually become stressed.

Pastures will eventually return to normal. This process will just take longer than usual because of our very dry spring.