

Extending the Grazing Season— To What End?

—Ulf Kintzel

Extending the grazing season well beyond the growing season is a desirable goal when raising sheep on pasture. Lengthening the grazing season and thus postponing feeding stored forage like hay or haylage can reduce feeding costs substantially. Extending grazing season can be achieved by different means. The most common and simplest method is by stockpiling existing perennial pasture. Stockpiling starts in a climate zone like mine in late August or the beginning of September. In a colder climate you want to start earlier in August; in a warmer climate you can start later in September. Basically, you

want to allow the pasture to grow for approximately 50 to 60 days before the end of your growing season. Of course, you can stockpile pasture for longer than the 60-day period. The risk is that the gain in growth may be minimal, if any, while the loss of quality and digestibility of the forage will increase with every passing day. Of course, in order to be able to stockpile, you cannot have a flock that already maxes out your existing pasture during growing season. Personally, I have more pasture available to graze than I need during grazing season. That allows for parts of my pasture being hayed. About the same acreage can then easily be set aside for stockpiling each



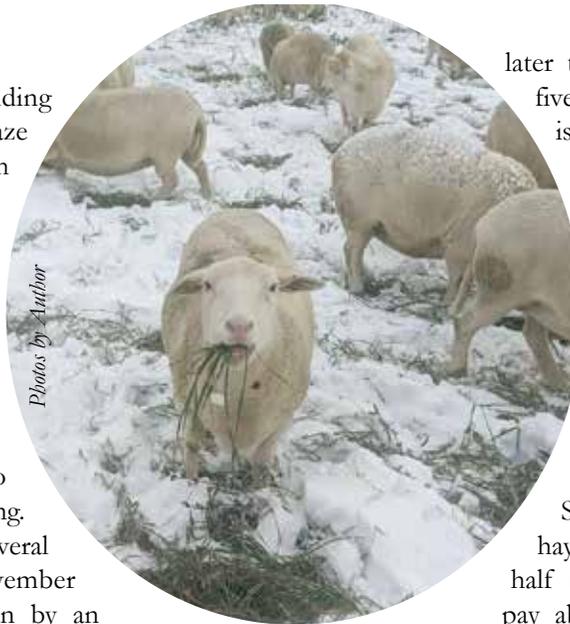
year.

Another way of extending the grazing season is to graze harvested hayfields or fields with suitable forage, e.g., harvested small grain fields where the grains that had fallen out prior to and during harvest and had germinated and grown some forage. That requires a certain skill set and often the use of herding dogs to get the sheep there. It also requires suitable portable fencing. I practice this every fall for several weeks in October and November and extend my grazing season by an additional several weeks that way.

A third method of extending the grazing season beyond the growing season is by planting annuals like oats or triticale. I am not in favor of doing this if it requires plowing up existing perennial pasture for that purpose. However, if harvested crop fields are available, you can kill two birds with one stone by planting a winter annual. First, it will help reduce soil erosion in an otherwise exposed field, and secondly, it can be used for grazing. Grazing such winter annual reduces its erosion control ability only minimally, especially if the plants are not grazed too short. A lot of the erosion control is done by the root system of the plant anyway.

Between stockpiling and grazing in the fall at neighboring farms, I can extend my annual grazing season to a total of about nine months. On average, I run out of fresh grazing cells in late December or early January. In some years heavy snowfall puts an end to grazing before I get to graze all my stockpiled pasture. However, that pasture keeps well under the snow cover and can often be grazed during a thaw in February. I practice a lot of foresight when grazing stockpiled pasture because weather conditions can be very unfavorable with cold temperatures combined with strong winds. I always graze the exposed pasture first and save the pasture that is protected by woods and hedgerows for cold and windy days. My existing woods and hedgerows can take down gusty winds to almost zero wind speed. A considerable acreage of mine is protected that way.

Because of my extended grazing season, I feed hay for only three months of the year. For planning purposes, I calculate 100 days because sometimes heavy snowfall comes a little earlier or spring comes a little



Freshly fallen snow of up to a foot does allow for grazing to continue, just as long there is forage of appreciable length underneath the snow.

later than usual. A sheep eats about five pounds of hay per day. There is always some hay that is being wasted when pulled out of the hay feeder by a sheep's mouth and some stemmy parts will just not be eaten. Let's say that is another pound per sheep per day, which makes it six pounds. I pay about \$100 per ton for the hay custom-made at my farm and up to \$160 per ton for hay I buy in locally.

Since I have currently half of my hay made at the farm and about half of my hay purchased locally, I pay about \$130 per ton on average, which amounts to about \$40 per sheep per winter season in hay feeding costs. During lambing season, some of the lambs will start eating some hay, which

adds some to the hay feeding cost. On average that means I have limited my annual hay feeding cost to about \$50 per ewe. For the sake of this article, it is irrelevant if the hay feeding cost in any given year differs some and drops perhaps to \$45 or even reaches \$60 per ewe. The fact of the matter remains that, comparatively speaking, my winter feeding cost is low. The low hay feeding cost pleases me, and I have no incentive to extend my grazing season even further. Further savings could only be made in small increments but at a rather high cost personally, both physically and mentally. In my area, the usual amount of snow and the low temperatures and the winds during the months of January and February generally make grazing unreasonable. In March the soil loses all structure, and it is often difficult or even impossible to drive in with a vehicle to bring fencing and water to where it is needed. However, in March I am in the barn anyway for lambing season, where the ewes are being fed hay. When the flock emerges from the barn in early April, grazing season is starting in most years again.

However, there are advocates for a longer grazing season in climate zones like mine here in western New York. It appears to me that to some who promote it, extending the grazing season even further has become a goal in itself without a real analysis as to why. There are, based on my personal experience, significant downsides to going to the extreme in wanting to extend the grazing season even further. Here is why: when the snow gets deep, especially when it has started to drift, it takes considerable energy to dig through the snow to get to

the forage. The energy used has to be made up for first before additional energy can be used to gain weight or have lambs grow inside the ewes during gestation. That becomes more and more difficult with increasing snow amounts and drifted snow.

Furthermore, as long as the winter weather is somewhat favorable with temperatures not too low and snow not too high, the nutrition of the stockpiled pasture is so good that market lambs keep gaining weight at a good rate. That changes immediately when the snow gets deep, and it takes an effort to get to the forage. That gain often comes entirely to a halt when it gets very cold since a considerable amount of energy will be used to keeping up the body temperature rather than gaining weight.

These are not the only downsides. I have been in extreme winter grazing situations over the past decades, not always by choice though. When I was in New Jersey and White Clover Sheep Farm was in its infant stages, I had no money but lots of youthful energy to spare. There were several winters with little or no snow. I had rented many neighboring hayfields to graze all winter with my still relatively small flock. However, there were other winters too. The very first one that I spent in my new chosen home taught me a lesson when a powerful Nor'easter dumped a lot of snow during one night in January. The pasture was now inaccessible for my truck, the forage out of reach for my sheep, and the electric fence buried to the top. I ended up pulling toboggan after toboggan with hay to the flock because I did not have a tractor. While other winters were much more favorable, the worry about the severity of each snow event was always with me. The difficulties when another snowstorm arrived were never again as extreme as the first time but still draining.

Priorities change from your mid-twenties to your mid-fifties, and I am no exception. The worry about each snowstorm wore me down over the years, not knowing if and how I could reach my flock in the rented pasture after another big snowstorm. The effect of each snowstorm became harder and harder to deal with. In recent years I have just accepted the fact that I will no longer graze all through the winter and don't plan on grazing my flock most of January and February and feed hay instead. The change in management also brought a change in my outlook on winter. For years I had dreaded the snowy season, and the anxiety of having to deal with

winter started in the fall. Now, winters are no longer a burden and I have come to enjoy snow again. Now my only worry after a snowstorm is to plow the driveway. While I still do not look forward to snow being dumped by the foot, feeding sheep at that time is a lot easier than attempting to graze them. Oftentimes I feed the round bales of first-cutting hay in my pasture and thus fertilize it as well, especially when it is bought-in hay. And when the weather is just too unbearable, I put the flock in the barn, at least for the night. Most of my electric nettings get removed before a severe snowstorm, perhaps with a divider fence of old electric nettings remaining in the field. My woven wire perimeter fence keeps the flock in.

How do others do it who advocate a longer grazing season in a climate zone comparable to mine? When I researched the issue and listened and watched as others do it, I found what I consider some big gaps in the notion of year-round grazing. In one case, the flock was fed a total mixed ration when it returned from winter pasture to the lambing barn. A video of them on their way home to the barn showed a number of animals in a condition I would have found unacceptably poor. It begs the question: What is saved when you graze sheep in extreme weather conditions with low temperatures, deep snow, and at times high winds when in the end you have to feed them the arguably most expensive feed there is to bring them back into an acceptable body condition? Besides it being hard on the sheep, why bother being hard on yourself in these extreme conditions, trying to dig out electric fencing and erecting it again for a new grazing cell when you can hardly walk through the snow? As I stated, for my sheep the grazing season stops sooner but the body condition for each and every one of them is off the scale at that time. They maintain this good body condition throughout the rest of the gestation period feeding on early-cut first-cutting hay. Remember, the *sole* reason for extending the grazing season is to save cost and not to have bragging rights. Having to feed the flock more expensive feed after grazing season ends to bring them back in condition does not appear to be a cost-saving measure.

Another detail I found advocated but impractical was the notion to graze areas exposed to the wind last because the wind would open up these fields by blowing the snow away. However, when these fields are grazed at a time when the snow is blown off, it is also a time when high winds bother the sheep a lot because it is also going to be cold. Offering a portable windbreak may

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In any given year I have several dozens of acres stockpiled, which I graze in late November, December, and into January.

offer shelter for the night but it doesn't do anything to help mitigate the discomfort that cold winds cause while grazing. Sheep will graze easily in temperatures around zero degrees when they are sheltered from the wind or when there are no winds. However, just add 10 miles per hour winds and even high teens are too uncomfortable for them to graze. Intake will go down and more energy will be used just to keep up the body temperature.

Because of the experience I made, I find it ill-advised to go to an extreme when wanting to extend the grazing season in areas that are likely to have a lot of snow in the winter. While extending it well beyond the end of growing season is a *very* desirable and achievable goal, it becomes counterproductive at a certain point in areas with lots of snow, low temperature, and strong winds. It will cause hardship to both sheep and sheep farmer and no longer be a cost-saving measure. Trying to get to a year-round grazing system for sheep does not make sense in western New York state and areas with a comparable climate. It makes a lot more sense in states that are further south and don't experience hard winters and only occasional snow. How long such extended grazing season should be does not only differ because of its geographic location. It will also differ from farm to farm. The skill set of each sheep farmer, the available land to stockpile for winter grazing, and the ability to plant annuals as winter forage will differ from farm to farm, even if they are located in the same town. While one should indeed try extending the grazing season, I

suggest finding a sweet spot where the cost savings are in good relation to the effort put forth. For me that sweet spot is nine months of grazing and three months of feeding first-cutting hay. If some grazing becomes available again during the snowiest winter months after a thaw, I'll take it, but I plan on having to feed hay for about 100 days and have hay stacked in the barn accordingly. My winter-feeding cost of about \$50 per ewe is low enough. I don't need to add another month or two of grazing just to be able to brag.

On a personal note: I am delighted and honored to be the featured keynote speaker on November 11 at The Organic Farming Conference <http://www.organicfarmingconf.com> held at the Mt. Hope Event Center in Mount Hope, Ohio. Look for the ad for the conference in this magazine. I will be speaking about raising grass-fed White Dorper sheep and how to properly manage pasture to be successful. But first I get to go down memory lane and speak about my life as a shepherd in places like communist East Germany and the Black Forest in West Germany. As you get older, as I am, you earn the right to tell stories and even repeat them often (as my kids tell me I do). 🐏

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. He farms in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone during "calling hour" indicated on the answering machine at 585-554-3313.