



Too Much Grass

—Ulf Kintzel

Photo by Author

It was an almost perfect season in 2023 as far as pasture growth is concerned, at least as perfect as it can get. Except for a short dry spell in early June and another in September, the grass kept growing. Whenever it seemed to get a bit dry, rain moved in. Yet it was never so much rain that it got too wet. East and west and south of me it was often either too dry for too long or too wet because of repeated storms. Customers who picked up White Dorper breeding stock from me, complained about the season. None were happy. The complaints of my fellow sheep farmers seemed justified.

In addition to the perfect season, I had a newly seeded 12-acre field that overperformed, and a 15-acre pasture that I used to lease, and which was supposed to get sold. Yet I ended up grazing it one more season. I couldn't let that opportunity slide.

All the while, two large pastures that were grazed early in the season and then hayed in June were not grazed at all during the summer, or a small part was grazed lightly in late July. "No problem," I thought, "I will graze it in the fall during breeding season." During that time, I divide my flock into four breeding groups and need to space them far apart. By early October, these pastures had lots of forage. Their location made them suitable for two of my breeding groups. The two other breeding groups were put in pastures that had been grazed in regular intervals throughout the season. Those had less forage in them than the two former ones. Yet the two pastures that had been rested since June underperformed in desirable forage. The sheep in these grazing cells were not pleased to be in them, approaching me after a day of grazing when I checked on each group. The two latter groups were far more content in their grazing cells, which had, comparatively speaking, less forage, which looked and indeed was far more palatable.

It told me once again what I had known for years but was now reminded of: There is such a thing as too long of a pasture rest. Too long of a rest period will lead to a decline of forage quality and thus a waste of pasture. Having used the "w" word (waste) I can picture the many

readers who in protest will shout out, "It is not wasted. It goes back in to the soil and supports soil health, it builds organic matter, it supports microorganisms." That is certainly all true. Except my pastures are not lacking soil health, organic matter, or microorganisms. I have very healthy pastures. I needed good, nutritious, and palatable pasture to flush my ewes to accomplish high ovulation rates.

Those who disagreed with me in past discussions about the length of long rest periods, longer than I advocate, have always set this premise when comparing: A rest period that is too short versus a long rest period. However, that is not where I am coming from, what shaped my viewpoint. I compare a proper rest period with one that is too long.

So, what is my definition of a rest period that is too short, one that is "proper," and one that is too long? While it depends on the season, a good rest period is between five and six weeks most of the season, shorter in early spring (as short as three weeks or the grass will grow away on me), and perhaps up to about seven weeks in the fall for the sake of stockpiling. In any case, any rest period well over 50 days will lead to a rapid decline of forage quality with less intake and forage wasted, meaning it will not go through my sheep first but goes directly back into the soil. My rest periods as quoted above when compared to rest periods above 50 days and beyond will be in no way inferior in all categories: forage quality, speed of regrowth, ground cover to catch rain and keeping the soil from drying out, building organic matter, and soil health and microorganisms. However, they will be superior in one important aspect: animal performance.

Last, I want to point out that my little essay addresses rest periods for well-established pasture with good soils in a humid climate like we have here in western New York. It does not address the establishment of new pasture. It does not address the management of pasture grown in depleted or marginal soils. And it does not address pasture in arid climates. In all these cases a longer rest period may and often does make sense. 🐑