Permanent Pasture Management

West Virginia has approximately one and three quarter million acres of permanent pasture. The productive potential on much of this land has not been reached. There are many factors that play a role in pasture productivity. Some of these factors can be controlled by the farmer and some cannot be controlled. Considerable improvement could be made in the state's permanent pasture if sound management practices were implemented. Below are some facts about pastures that could be used to make good pasture management decisions.

1) Do not start grazing too early in the spring: Growth produced by plants must come from either photosynthesis or stored reserves. At this time reserves are at a low level and repeated removal of the tops at this time can do considerable damage. In addition, the leaves are removed which are needed for photosynthesis and later plant growth. Early spring grazing can greatly reduce total yields for the year. There should be four inches or more of the forage before grazing begins.

2) Do not over graze: When pastures are continually over grazed plants are weakened and many productive species die and unproductive ones replace them. Leaf area is reduced and the growth rate is slow. Water runoff is increased, soil temperature increases and overall pasture quality and quantity decrease.

3) Do not under graze: When pastures are under grazed forage will accumulate and not be used. In order for pasture production to be profitable, the forage produced must be utilized.

Under grazing also allow briers and woody species to get established.

4) Apply lime when needed: Lime provides needed nutrients and also corrects soil acidity which can limit plant growth. Determine lime needs by soil test.

5) Fertilize wisely: Most permanent pastures in the area test high in potash but low in phosphorus. Soil test to determine crop needs. In general, nitrogen fertilizer should not be used on permanent pastures. Nitrogen fertilizer increases yields for only a short period and then must be repeated if yields are to be maintained. Nitrogen fertilizer decreases legume content, increases lime requirements, is expensive, and has other disadvantages when used on permanent pasture.

6) Encourage legumes: Legumes provide nitrogen for grasses, increase yields and greatly improve pasture quality. Legumes require high lime and fertilizer values and if they are to be maintained, they must be properly grazed.

7) Control undesirable plants: In general the plants growing in a pasture are the ones best suited to the conditions which exist in the pasture. To change plant species, change the environment by grazing pressure and/or fertility. Don’t worry about a few weeds in pastures. Livestock will consume most of them and if eaten when vegetative, they are nutritious. A few weeds will not be eaten by livestock and few are poisonous and need special attention. Good grazing management will eliminate the need for clipping in many cases.