

4/9/2005

Dividing horse pastures into small paddocks boosts productivity

Krishona Martinson, Regional Extension Educator

Dividing the pasture area for your horse into several small paddocks is one of the best ways to make the pasture more productive. Small paddocks can also contribute to better weed control and manure management, according to Wright County educator Maribel Fernandez of the University of Minnesota Extension Service.

Fernandez will give a presentation on horse grazing habits and pasture improvement at an upcoming Horse Clinic on May 21 in Wright County. The clinic will be hosted by Kevin and Karen Erickson at their Forelock Meadows Ranch north of Cokato. Directions to the ranch are available by calling the Ericksons at (320) 286-6782. Clinic participants are encouraged to bring cookies or bars to share.

Fernandez says horses tend to have strong individual preferences regarding what type of forage plants they prefer to graze. "When a horse finds an area in the pasture that has the type of forage it prefers, it will usually keep on grazing this area and disregard the rest of the pasture," she says. "Because of the continuous grazing, the preferred plants are always in the initial phase of the growing stage. This young stage is when the plants have the highest digestible fiber, sugar and protein content and are most palatable.

"The problem is that these preferred plants become weak and can't compete with less desirable plants such as other grasses and weeds. The weeds can end up taking over the pasture."

Allowing appropriate rest periods for the forage and mowing after moving the horse to a new paddock can help counter spot grazing problems, says Fernandez. It is common for a horse to choose an area of the pasture to defecate and not graze that area at all, says Fernandez. This concentrates all nutrients from the whole pasture in one manure-overloaded spot. The spot becomes a source of flies and pollution, and soil nutrients from the rest of the pasture are depleted. "Dividing a pasture into several smaller paddocks ameliorates this problem," says Fernandez. "Instead of one or two big dropping areas, you have several smaller ones. Smaller manure piles dry and break up faster, reducing fly numbers and odor. Horses are more willing to eat the forage growing there. You can also drag the paddock, which helps break up the piles and dry the manure, as well as distribute nutrients

back to the rest of the grazing area."

While spot grazing weakens a horse's favorite forage plants, it allows other plants--including weeds--to thrive and develop to the seed stage, says Fernandez. This means that dividing the pasture into smaller paddocks helps control weeds. "Of course a few plants will escape being grazed no matter how small a paddock is," says Fernandez. "Mowing weeds at or before flower stage prevents a new crop of weeds."

She suggests applying herbicides selectively and carefully if absolutely necessary. "Applying chemicals in the spring or summer will have a long-term impact only on annual and biennial weeds," she points out. "For effective perennial weed control you have to keep on cutting or mowing until fall to prevent new seeds from forming, and apply the herbicide at the beginning of fall before plants go dormant."