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When Should Range be Grazed After a Burn?

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Burning is an inexpensive means to improve protein and digestibility of forage for cattle. Research has shown improvements in cow reproductive performance and increased calf production per acre due to prescribed burning. However, timing of grazing is very important.

If grazing occurs too soon after a burn, the forage resource can be adversely affected, or if grazing is deferred too long after a burn, the benefit of improvement in forage quality can be lost.

When plants are burned, energy to replace burned leaves comes from stored sugars and starch. This creates a "debt" to the plant which the new leaves must pay back after they regrow. Saw palmetto requires about 12 months to replenish energy, while most range grasses require several weeks, depending on month of burn. It is common, especially in spring, to see cows on range a few days after a burn. Grazing too soon removes leaves before they can replenish the plant's energy, and the result is reduced vigor and even plant death.

Forage yield is so low in the weeks after a burn that it makes no sense to keep on range immediately after a burn, and it gives a bad impression to people not familiar with the cattle or range. The amount of forage on wiregrass range at various times after different months of burning are shown in the accompanying table.

Wiregrass range re-grew faster when burned in warmer months (October, March, May) than cooler months, and more forage was available at 60 than at 30 days after the burn.

Bluestem range at Ona that was burned in October and grazed in January had 740 pounds per acre of dry matter available, 350 pounds per acre of which was bluestems. Similar range burned in February and grazed beginning in June had 550 pounds per acre total dry matter available, of which 300 pounds per acre was bluestems. If a 900 pound cow eats 18 pounds of dry matter per day, you can get an idea of about how long the forage will last (or how much area a cow must cover).

About 35 days after an April or May burn, or 60 days after a December, January or February burn, will allow sufficient time for maintenance of vigor in bluestems and other desirable grasses. Wiregrass, which probably couldn't be grazed out anyway, is notorious for decline in quality after a burn. At 60 days after a February burn, wiregrass still contains about eight percent protein (along with 400 pounds per acre dry matter yield), which is adequate for brood cow maintenance.

Bluestem also contains about eight percent protein and about 45 to 50 percent digestibility at 60 days after a burn. Burning, then deferring grazing for an appropriate time is responsible management with benefits to the cattle and the range resource.

<i>Month of Burn</i>	<i>Days after burn</i>	
	30	60
	Dry matter yield, lb/A	
October	120	210
November	70	130
January	100	200
March	160	250
May	230	650
<i>(Hughes, 1975. USFS Res. Not SE 222.)</i>		

Milk cow numbers of Florida dairy farms in February totaled 182,000, one percent less than a year ago, says the Florida Agricultural Service.

Marketings of fed cattle during February totaled 1.4 million, down two percent from a year earlier, according to USDA.