

Rotational Grazing Management for Horses¹

Laura Bennett²

Introduction

Pasture management is an important aspect of horsekeeping and equine property management. This publication provides an overview of rotational grazing, including practical recommendations and examples for implementation. The information that follows is intended for equine owners, equine facility managers, and county Extension faculty working in the areas of livestock and natural resources.

What Is Rotational Grazing?

Rotational grazing provides alternating rest and growth periods for grass and can improve pasture utilization and forage production (Sollenberger et al. 2018; Vendramini and Sollenberger 2020). The rest period, which is absent in continuous grazing, allows forage to build new leaves and replenish root reserves. Skipping this rest period can eventually thin the forage and invite weeds.

Simply put, as the number of paddocks increases, so does the percent utilization because there is less waste. Horses tend to be selective grazers. When horses are concentrated on small areas, they do not have as much chance to be selective and will graze more uniformly. Subdividing pastures into smaller paddocks requires the expense of extra fencing. Temporary fencing for paddocks using electric fencing can be an economical option in place of permanent cross fencing (Burdine et al. 2008).

Implementing Rotational Grazing

To get started, try a two-week break between grazing events. Do not graze below about a 3-inch forage height. Paddocks can be mowed after horses are removed to cut back weeds and to even the grass height; mow at a height above 3 inches. Dividing the pasture into 2 paddocks is simplest, but adding more paddocks will provide greater control and will likely increase production. If the size of the property supports having 4 paddocks, each could be grazed for a week and then rested for 3 weeks. One area will need to become a “sacrifice” lot because horses will always have access to it no matter which paddock they are grazing. This “sacrifice” area will house their water, feed troughs, and shade structures (if necessary). Figures 1 and 2 provide example layouts for grazing paddocks and sacrifice lots.

Dragging of the pastures can be incorporated in the paddock rotations. When temperatures go above 90 degrees Fahrenheit with no rain for several days in a row, parasite eggs cannot survive. That makes it safe to “drag” pastures with a harrow or length of chain-link fence to break up manure piles. Keep horses on a different paddock for a week to give the sun time to kill the parasite larvae. Drag the paddock after horses are moved to the next grazing area. Dragging during cooler, wetter weather spreads viable parasite eggs around the paddock, contaminating the entire area rather than just the waste areas horses naturally avoid.

1. This document is VM268, a publication of the UF College of Veterinary Medicine, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date February 2025. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication. © 2025 UF/IFAS. This publication is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

2. Laura Bennett, Extension agent II, multicounty, M.S., UF/IFAS Extension Pasco County; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

Representations of Potential Paddock Layouts for Rotational Grazing Systems

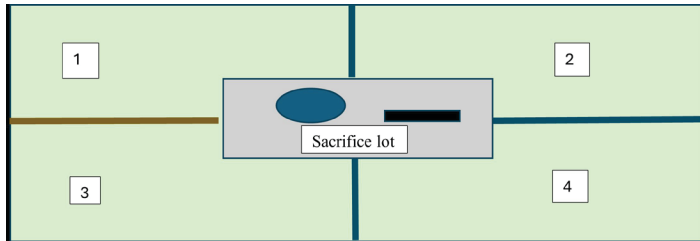


Figure 1. A four-paddock layout with a sacrifice lot in the center that allows access to water and feed troughs.

Credits: Laura Bennett

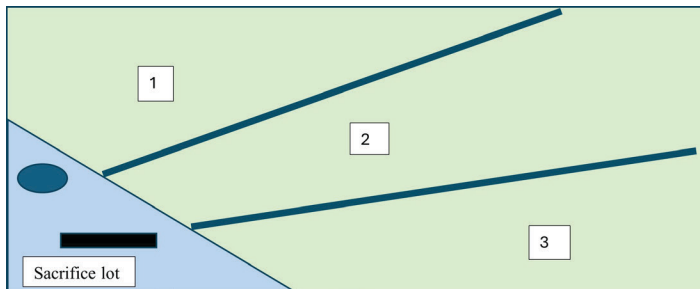


Figure 2. A three-paddock layout with a sacrifice lot in the corner that allows access to water and feed troughs.

Credits: Laura Bennett

References

Burdine, K., B. Coleman, and T. Missun. 2008. "Temporary Fencing for Horse Pastures." ID-165. University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. <https://publications.ca.uky.edu/sites/publications.ca.uky.edu/files/id165.pdf>

Sollenberger, L. E., J. M. B. Vendramini, J. C. B. Dubeux, and M. Wallau. 2018. "Grazing Management Concepts and Practices: SS-AGR-92/AG160, rev. 5/2018." *EDIS* 2018 (4). <https://doi.org/10.32473/edis-ag160-2002>

Vendramini, J., and L. Sollenberger. 2020. "Impact of Grazing Methods on Forage and Cattle Production: SS-AGR-133." *EDIS*. <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/AG268>