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Getting clipped

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—“Too much of a good thing can be wonderful,” Mae West observed.

Perhaps the Queen of Sex was referring to ice-cream socials. I don't think she was talking about rain.

It has rained in Blue Grass about two-thirds of the days from late May through mid-July. I welcome a late afternoon shower several times a week, but day after dreary, drippy, drizzly, dribbly day leaves me despondent and longing for the sunny skies of the Amazonian rainforest.

Rain, of course, grows vegetation, which is good. But too much rain grows pasture grasses faster than the cattle can eat them.

This means that they are now eating their way through semi-hayfields where about 30 percent of the visible forage has reached full, seed-head maturity. This is what you want in hay, but not in working pastures where it's just wasted as cattle mash and trample it.

I realize that my problem does not rank higher than the Iranian nuclear deal or whether Donald Trump's hair is reproducing up there hermaphroditically. But, for around here, unused forage means fewer pounds of gain and less money in the fall.

Neighbors now think I'm supporting Trump, because my pastures resemble his hair—unruly, tall and rank.

I try each year to rotate the cattle through the paddocks in a way that matches the available forage to promoting the most weight gain. Ideally, I move them from a grazed paddock to a fresh one when they've eaten the grass down to five to eight inches in height. Both pasture and livestock benefit when the grazer can get his animals to eat as much good-quality forage as they want.

This year, I'm guilty of undergrazing. Grass got ahead of the cattle...and their manager. Too much rain is no defense.

Doing nothing when guilty is always an excellent strategy for managing a problem that you don't want to deal with.

Nothing *really* bad will happen if I stay on the veranda sipping cold drinks on steamy-hot days.

But the right thing to do for the cattle, the farm and even my pocketbook is to intervene—to provide them more green grass over the next three months and fewer brown stalks three-feet high.

Both overgrazing -- a common problem in dry August-September - - and undergrazing -- most often seen in the spring when growth is fastest --degrade pasture quality, though in different ways.

I've been experimenting with ways to maintain forage quality during the coming dry weeks. A lot of stuff out in the fields is not good enough; I want the right stuff out there down here.

So I intervened...by running around in circles...and navigating misshapen polygons that matched the fence lines of my paddocks.

I did this on a tractor with an attached rotary cutter. (Bush Hog is one brand of cutter, though it's often used to mean all such rear-mounted attachments.)

The solution to undergrazed pasture is to clip everything down to about four to six inches.

Clipping grazed pasture in mid-July whacks jaggy thistle and toxic horse nettle before they can cast their seeds. With weeds, I believe in birth control, abortion and murder at any age and by any means.

Clipping also increases stem density of pasture grasses, adds organic material and allows more light to reach the grasses and clovers.

Clipping's one drawback is that it requires hours spent sitting on a metal seat over a hot tractor, driving slowly around and around and up and down and over and back, paying just enough attention to avoid rolling over on a slope.

I'll spend more than 20 hours clipping 50 acres and lay out \$200 for gas and lubricants.

Some portion of most lives involves unstimulating, repetitive labor where you just have to keep enough of your wits about you to avoid a disaster from letting your mind wander wild and free.

Thomas Jefferson in 1807 complained in a letter to John Dickinson: “To myself personally [the Office of President] brings nothing but unceasing drudgery and daily loss of friends.” Despite periodic headaches, probably migraines, which incapacitated him for most of a workday, Jefferson managed to think broadly without rolling his political tractor on top of his own head.

As you move up the career hierarchy, you are allowed to assign subordinates to do your drudgery. President Obama, for example, has someone else hack at the thistles and nettles that threaten his administration.

Alas, I am my own subordinate.

To cope with time spent in the boring-but-useful activity of clipping pastures, I’ve developed five strategies for keeping myself mentally alert. In order of no importance:

1. Semi-hypnotize self by robotically singing lyrically incorrect snatches of half-remembered songs like “Blue Moon” (1961) by The Marcels from Pittsburgh, who named themselves for a wavy hairstyle, which I’ve abandoned in favor of a sleeker look.

2. Review reasons why I am driving a tractor in Blue Grass on a steamed-bun afternoon rather than sitting in an air-conditioned office writing a memo to my management team on the 14 reasons why I’ve decided to replace the office’s eight-ounce coffee cups with the six-ounce alternative. (Note to team: I rejected the most cost-effective option, which is sharing one never-to-be washed cup, which would save on the purchase of both cups and coffee while conserving water and soap and reducing time wasted fixing the brew.)

3. Evaluate all the wrong decisions I’ve made in the past and compare and contrast all similar, if not identical, decisions I will likely make in the future.

4. Wonder why theft is so central to the starting of large fortunes. I intend to interview John D. Rockefeller rather than rely on secondary sources. Mark Zuckerberg has offered to explain why the Winklevoss twins received \$65 million from him for not stealing their idea for Facebook.

5. Speculate as to the cosmic wisdom of stocking local pastures with groundhogs whose holes shake my nerves and rattle my brains.

I'm about two-thirds done with this job.
My Trumped-up pastures now look like they're wearing a crew cut.
Getting clipped never felt so good.