PURDUE UNIVERSITY
Extension

TOP 10 TIPS FOR MANAGING PASTURES, HAY FIELDS, SILAGE AND BALED HAY AFTER FLOODING

The flooding that occurred across Indiana has left many livestock and forage producers wondering what comes next. Fields may be covered with sediment, fences and water systems damaged, pastures saturated, and hay or silage exposed to floodwaters.
While every farm and field will be different, a few basic principles can help producers make good decisions during the recovery process.

1. SAFETY FIRST – DON'T RUSH BACK INTO THE FIELD

Before entering flooded areas, make sure floodwaters have receded and the ground is safe. Flooding can move debris, wire, metal, chemicals and other hazards into fields. Inspect fences, gates, water systems, bridges and other infrastructure before turning livestock back into an area.

Walk fields carefully and remove debris that could injure livestock or damage equipment.

2. KEEP LIVESTOCK OFF SATURATED PASTURES

It can be tempting to turn livestock back onto pasture as soon as the water disappears, especially when hay supplies are already tight. Resist that temptation.

Wet soils are easily damaged by livestock traffic. Hoof action can destroy soil structure, increase compaction and create mud and erosion problems that may persist long after the floodwaters are gone.

Allow soils to dry and plants time to recover before grazing. Flood-damaged pastures may need several weeks of rest, depending on the severity of the flooding and the condition of the forage stand.

3. ASSESS SEDIMENT AND DEBRIS DAMAGE

Once conditions are safe, walk or drive through each field and evaluate the amount of sediment and debris deposited by the flood.

Light sediment deposits may allow established perennial grasses to recover. Heavier deposits can smother plants and may require mechanical removal or renovation. Nebraska Extension notes that many perennial forages can produce new growth when sediment deposits are less than about 2 inches, while deeper deposits may result in significant stand loss.

Do not automatically assume a pasture needs to be destroyed and reseeded. Give surviving plants an opportunity to recover before making that decision.

4. GIVE PASTURES TIME TO RECOVER BEFORE GRAZING

Flooding damages plants in several ways, including restricting oxygen to roots, reducing nutrient uptake and damaging growing points. The amount of damage depends upon the forage species, length of time underwater, soil type, temperature and stage of plant growth.

Once water recedes, allow plants to rebuild root reserves and produce new shoots before grazing. If large portions of a farm are damaged, consider using a sacrifice area or temporary feeding area while pastures recover.

If regrowth is grazed, avoid grazing it too closely. Livestock should not be allowed to graze down into dead or contaminated plant material.

5. FLOODED HAY: FEED RISK AND FIRE RISK

Flooded forage deserves special attention.

Hay that has been submerged or contaminated with floodwater may contain silt, mold, bacteria, chemicals, petroleum products or other contaminants. Mold can reduce nutritional value and some molds can produce mycotoxins.

Do not feed hay that has mold throughout the bale or that has been exposed to potentially toxic contaminants. When in doubt, have the forage evaluated by a forage specialist, veterinarian or nutritionist.

Flooded and wet hay is more than a feed-quality concern — it can become a serious fire hazard. As wet hay heats, spontaneous combustion can occur.

Move soaked bales out of barns and away from buildings as soon as they can be handled safely. Do not wait until the rest of the cleanup is finished. Keep wet hay separated from dry hay.

Watch for signs of heating, including unusual warmth, a burnt or caramel-like smell, steam or smoke. If hay is smoking or extremely hot, do not attempt to move it yourself. Contact your local fire department for assistance.
Remember: Your safety comes first. A bale of hay is not worth risking a life or a building.

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6. BE ESPECIALLY CAREFUL WITH WRAPPED BALES AND SILAGE

Floodwater can create problems even when plastic appears intact.

Open and inspect flood-exposed wrapped bales, baleage and silage. Look for changes in smell, color, texture and evidence of silt or mold. Flooded wrapped forage can spoil even when the outside appears acceptable.

If plastic has been torn, repair or re-wrap the bale as soon as possible to reduce additional spoilage. Flood-exposed wrapped forage should be monitored closely and, when considered safe, generally used sooner rather than later.

7. TEST QUESTIONABLE FORAGE BEFORE FEEDING

Visual inspection and smell are important, but they do not tell the entire story.

Flood-damaged forage can have increased ash and dry matter from silt contamination and reduced protein and energy concentrations. Depending on the situation, testing for nutritional value and mycotoxins may be appropriate.

Before feeding questionable forage, talk with your veterinarian and livestock nutritionist about appropriate sampling and testing. If test results indicate a potential problem, do not assume that simply mixing contaminated forage with good hay will make it safe.

8. EVALUATE STANDING HAY AND SILAGE CROPS BEFORE HARVESTING

Flooding does not automatically mean a standing crop should be harvested or abandoned. Evaluate each field individually.

Consider how long the crop was underwater, how much sediment or debris was deposited, whether contaminants may be present and whether the crop can still be harvested safely.

Fields with significant silt or contamination may not be appropriate for forage production. When contamination is suspected, seek advice before harvesting a crop that could ultimately enter the livestock feed supply.

9. CHECK SOIL FERTILITY AFTER THE WATER RECEDES

Flooding can move soil and nutrients and may change field conditions. Once soils are dry enough to sample appropriately, consider taking soil samples to determine whether fertility or pH has changed.

Avoid applying fertilizer simply because a field "looks like it needs it." A soil test provides a much better basis for determining what nutrients are actually needed as the forage stand recovers.

Also watch for erosion, gullies, exposed roots and areas where soil has been deposited or removed. These problems may need to be addressed before returning the field to normal production.

10. DOCUMENT EVERYTHING

Take photographs. Lots of them.
Document flooded fields, sediment deposits, damaged fences, washed -out areas, lost forage, damaged hay and silage, debris and other losses. Record the dates when flooding occurred and when water receded.

Keep an inventory of damaged or lost bales and other forage. Good documentation may be important when working with insurance, disaster assistance programs, lenders or tax professionals. Specifics to document include: damage with photographs, bale numbers and other information.

ONE FINAL REMINDER

There is no one-size-fits-all answer for recovering a flooded forage system. The best decision may be different from one field to the next — and even one portion of a field to another.

When in doubt, don't feed it, don't graze it and don't destroy the stand until you have had a chance to evaluate the situation. Your local Extension educator, forage specialist, veterinarian and livestock nutritionist can help you determine the safest course of action.

Flood recovery will take time. The goal is not simply to get livestock back onto pasture or salvage every possible bale. The goal is to protect livestock, protect the soil and forage resource, and make sound decisions that will help the farm recover for the seasons ahead.

The following resources provide additional information on managing pastures, hay, silage and livestock feed following flooding and other significant weather events:

West Virginia University Extension
"Flooded Pastures and Forages"

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension
"Reclaiming Flood-damaged Pastures and Forage Production"

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension
"How to Handle Hay Following a Hurricane or Flood"

University of Tennessee Beef & Forage Center — "Forage Management: Pasture and Hay Challenges After Hurricane Helene"

University of Georgia Extension
"Dealing with Pasture, Hay, Feed, and Livestock Losses After Significant Weather Events"

Alabama Cooperative Extension System
"Animal, Forage, and Feed Management Following a Flood"

North Dakota State University Extension
"Salvaging Crops After Flooding"

University of Vermont Extension
"Managing Flood-Damaged Crops and Forage"