

## Managing Horse Pastures Through Spring Drought

Much of the state is experiencing moderate to extreme drought (Figure 1), and extended forecasts do not predict relief any time soon. Here's some recommendations for horse owners, adapted from Dr. John Fike's recommendations for livestock and hay producers.

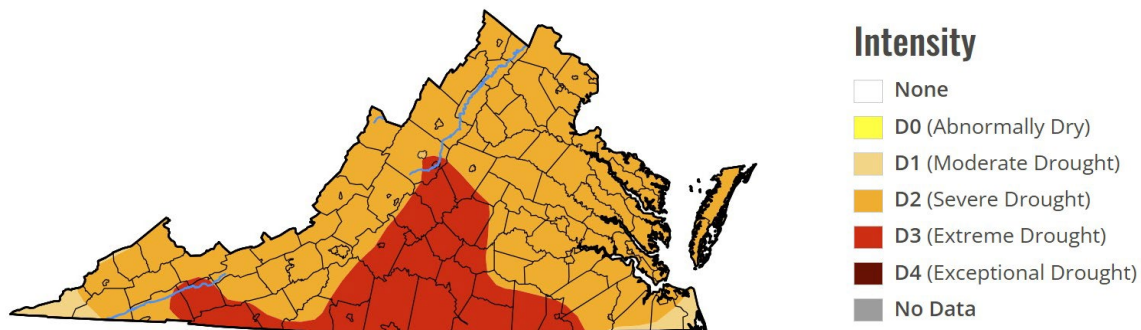


Figure 1. Drought conditions in Virginia as of May 14, 2026, as reported by the US Drought Monitor (<https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu>) This screenshot was taken from the Virginia map available at <https://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/CurrentMap/StateDroughtMonitor.aspx?VA>.

- 1. Should horse farm managers mow or graze pasture to remove seed heads so that the plants direct energy towards growing more leaf blades?** Maybe. If pastures are more than 6" tall and horses are pulled off before grazing below 6". We typically recommend leaving at least 4", but grazing or mowing below 6" during drought conditions will cause added stress to cool-season grasses, reducing root depth and the plant's ability to recover once rain does come. Additionally, the soil loses protection from sun and wind, which will dry soils even more. Overgrazing during a drought can lead to complete stand failure and expensive re-seeding, not to mention the need to keep horses off pastures even longer. If pastures are grazed down to 4", move animals to a dry lot and feed hay (see number 4 below).
- 2. What does this mean for this year's hay crop?** Hay producers have been dealing with the effects of dry weather for several years now. Fall and spring droughts are especially hard because that's when cool season grasses (like Timothy,

Orchardgrass and fescue) grow. Much of the highest quality horse hay comes from fields rotated between corn, soybeans and hay. Except that it's been too dry in the Fall and Spring to get grass established. So, not only are yields down, but the number of acres in hay is down as well. Hay will likely be in short supply again this year and through next winter.

**3. Fertilizer and Nitrogen applications during drought can lead to high nitrate levels in forage and hay...should horse owners be concerned?** Because horses are not ruminants, they have a much higher tolerance for nitrate in their diet than other livestock. While we worry about levels above 4500 ppm for ruminants, horses can safely consume 10,000-15,000 ppm.

**4. What other strategies should horse farms consider?**

- **Utilize sacrifice areas or dry lots.** This is one of the best grazing management tools horse owners can implement. It can be as simple as using temporary electric fence to sacrifice one corner of a field (creating a lot where hay is fed), so that the rest of the pasture can survive the drought. That same electric fence can protect new grass seedlings next Fall (while we cross our fingers and hope the weather pattern changes)
- **Be willing to accept lower quality hay.** It can be hard to find a good hay source. Supporting that hay producer, even when their bales are not ideal, will encourage that farmer to keep making horse hay and to keep you on their list. Horses that are not growing, breeding or in heavy competition have relatively low energy and protein requirements, and commercial feeds can easily make up for shortages.
- **Consider alternative forages to stretch hay supplies such as hay pellets and bagged or compressed hay**
- **For horse owners who already restrict grazing due to metabolic issues,** stockpiling grass stands (rather than mowing) and grazing these during late summer and late winter can help reduce hay need while providing nutrition and sugar levels that are similar to hay.
- **Delay fertilizer applications until Fall,** take soil samples and adjust pH with lime, if needed.

Carrie Swanson,

Senior Extension Agent, Albemarle/Charlottesville Office



## Drought Proofing Your Pasture

A Guide for Horse Owners

The key to building resilient pasture is to have a thick stand with deep roots. Here are some do's and don'ts to help drought proof your pasture.

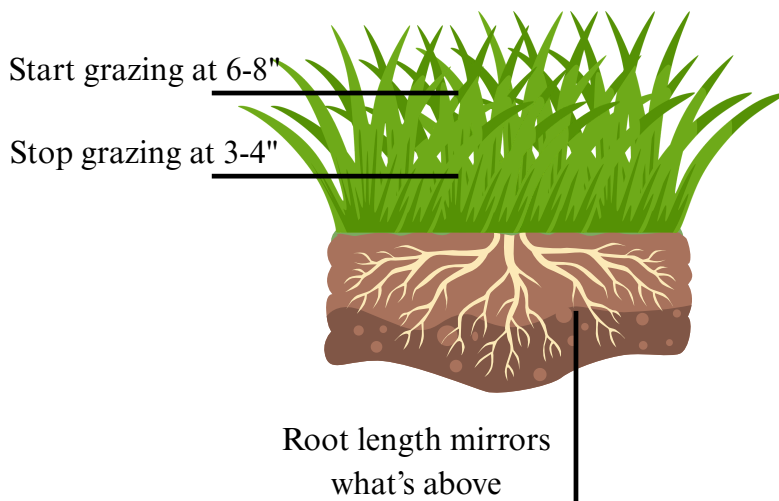
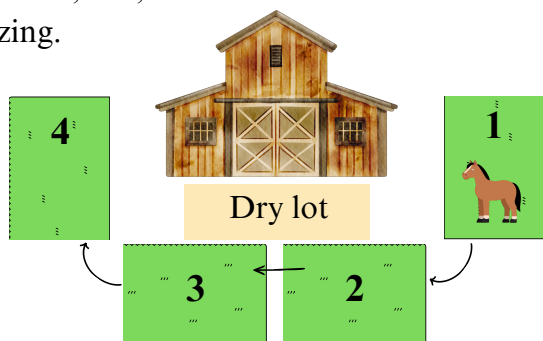
### DO:

- Follow the recommended stocking rate of 2-3 acres per horse. More land will be needed with hills, poor soil, trees, poor drainage, etc.
- Protect soil - keep it covered, leave plants taller
- Stockpiling or strip grazing
- Utilize rotational grazing and pasture rest

### Rotational Grazing

Hint: The key ingredient is rest!

Graze pasture from 8" to 3" → move horses → mow or harrow → rest. Use a dry lot when dormant, wet, or to allow 3+ weeks before grazing.



Root length mirrors what's above

### DON'T:

- Continuously graze
- Turn out as individuals or in small groups
- Have "sacred pastures" - pastures designated to one horse or group, i.e. "Buddy's pasture"

### Tips to help facilitate rotational grazing:

- Divide pastures with temporary electric tape or rope.
- Multiple grazing areas can use the same water and shelter.
- Graze smaller areas for shorter amounts of time.
- Ideally move horses once per week.
- Have a dry lot or sacrifice lot for inclement weather, easy keepers, etc.
- Use a track system or "paddock paradise" to keep horses moving when not grazing.

Questions? Call your local Extension Agent!