Pasture Management Guidelines for Equine Owners

The advisory notes below are intended as helpful guidelines; they are not intended to represent a comprehensive set of actions or a set of rigid prescriptions but rather offer informal advice about some of the issues that we regularly encounter. They are drawn from a range of sources and are intended to help those who wish to minimise the impact on wildlife of their work but are not quite sure of the best approach. Our understanding about land management has been built up through the experience of those who live and work in the countryside, so if you have any additional tips or comments please feel free to feed them in.

NB: These are guidelines only; if you are managing an area that has been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest it is crucial that you contact Natural England to get their approval before undertaking any management. Failure to do so could result in prosecution. Management may include a wide range of activities such as grazing or cutting a pasture or managing ditches and hedgerows.

Advice and Grants

The New Forest Land Advice Service provides free independent advice to land managers and owners in the New Forest and Avon Valley. A number of grants are available for carrying out environmental improvements on your holdings and the NF Land Advice Service will be able to advise you whether you are eligible and how you might apply.

Please contact Julie Stubbs on 01590 646696 or email julie.stubbs@nflandadvice.org.uk if you would like advice about any aspect of the management of your land.

Grassland Management

The New Forest supports a huge range of types of grassland and it is impossible to provide a single piece of generic advice that will be appropriate for all occasions. A wide variety of considerations, from weather to geology and soils, will mean that each area will need to be looked at on an individual basis. In the section below we have tried to identify some of the key issues that may be of interest and provide some general principles that we feel may help. We recognise that they may not be appropriate in all circumstances. If you feel that there are other issues that would be of interest please let us know.

General Pasture Management

We do not believe it is appropriate to be overly prescriptive when discussing general pasture management regimes. An appropriate grazing density on one field may be utterly inappropriate in similarly sized field elsewhere depending on types of stock, time of year or a host of other factors. What is not in debate is that heavily overgrazed paddocks look awful and are not good for horses or ponies either. As a rule of thumb try to retain a minimum of 1-2 inches (2.5-5cm) of grass on your pasture at all times.

In general it is better to maintain you pasture year round rather than rely on fertilising, harrowing and rolling paddocks at the traditional times of year in spring and autumn. The key with pasture management is to get the timing right, avoid working on waterlogged pastures wherever possible. If supplementary feeding or the use of mineral licks is deemed essential try to move these around as much as possible to avoid creating areas of bare ground. In some circumstances it may be better to create a hard standing area for mineral licks and livestock handling. Heavily poached bare ground causes degeneration of the soil and encourages the growth of undesirable weeds.

Finally, try to retain an area of longer grass somewhere in you field, ideally around the border or margin or the field; long grass is incredible important for butterflies and small mammals such as field mice and bank voles.

Weed Control

The definition of a weed is a plant in the wrong place. Clearly some species of plant are highly undesirable, particularly if they begin to dominate areas of pasture. The best way to stop weeds dominating is to manage pastures well to ensure that over grazing and poaching is kept to a minimum. However we all recognise that is not always possible. Where thistles, docks or nettles are a problem you have a number of options at your disposal. Topping of areas during the summer will reduce the vigour of some species and limit their spread. The timing of topping is quite important, for example if you top creeping thistle too early it will simply re grow with as much vigour as before and you will be repeating the exercise in a few weeks. More effective, but much more labour intensive, is digging out or “spudding” of problem species. There are a number of back saving tools on the market but there is no getting away from the fact that this can be hard work! If the weed problem is extensive then spot spraying with an appropriate herbicide is often used as a method of control. If herbicides are used animals will need to be excluded for a period of time. When using herbicides it is extremely important that the directions on the label are followed. If you are unsure of the correct method of use it is advisable to use a agricultural contractor for such work.

NB It is extremely important that herbicides are not used in the proximity of ditches or water courses without prior permission of the Environment Agency. If the site is a SSSI you will need to contact Natural England to agree the management technique and may not be able to use chemicals on the land.

Ragwort

The ragwort control Act 2003 places a duty on landowners to control ragwort on their land. Ragwort is a relatively unpalatable plant that is poisonous and can cause death to cattle and equines. A particular problem with ragwort is that its bitter taste is lost when dry but its toxic properties remain. This means that if ragwort gets into hay animals eating it will not be able to detect the plant with potentially disastrous consequences. If grazing is sparce some animals will turn to ragwort and even get a liking for the bitter taste, this will have very serious impacts on their health and may even lead to death. Control of ragwort can be undertaken by pulling or spraying. In

small paddocks pulling is the most effective control method. If a field is to be left ungrazed for a long period of time and the infestation is extensive topping may be an option. It is crucial that ragwort is managed before it starts to set seed, once seed is setting the opening up of the soil caused by pulling will provide a perfect seedbed. Appropriate disposal of pulled ragwort is essential, ideally ragwort should be disposed of on site in an area away from grazing animals. If this option is not available landfilling is an option. For further information refer to Defra's Guidelines for ragwort control at http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-pets/wildlife/management/weeds/pdf/ragwort-dispose.pdf or the British Horse Society's Danger of Ragwort advice leaflet at http://www.bhs.org.uk/Horse_Care/Campaigns/Ragwort.aspx

Flower Rich Meadows

The New Forest is particularly fortunate in that it still retains many wildflower rich meadows; elsewhere in the country it is estimated that 95% of these meadows have disappeared in the last 50 years. These type of meadow are not only important for wildflowers but also provide homes for a wide range of scarce insects. Flower rich meadows also produce "sweet" mineral rich hay and grazing which provides well balanced fodder high in fibre for equines. The key factor that enables a wide variety of wildflowers to thrive is, surprisingly, a relatively low nutrient level. The "unimproved" nature of these meadows prevents vigorous grass species from out competing more unusual flowering plants. These meadows require grazing and equines are important in the management of many small meadows in and around the Forest. The important thing to keep in mind, if you do manage a meadow of this kind, is to avoid agricultural improvement, for example drainage and artificial fertiliser and/or lime application. These activities will greatly reduce the number of wildflowers for many years or even decades to come.

Supplementary feeding

Supplementary feeding is perfectly justifiable in certain circumstances however if you do not supplementary feed livestock it will be unlikely that your pasture will become overgrazed because stock will need to be moved to new pastures before overgrazing takes placed. If supplementary feeding or the use of mineral licks is deemed necessary try to move these around as much as possible to avoid creating areas of bare ground. Feeding hay can cause particular problems in wet weather, if hay is fed try to remove any left over material as soon as possible.

Rolling and harrowing

It is better to maintain a constant grass cover to protect the soil structure from the adverse effects of trampling if possible. If damage has occurred rolling is often used to "repair" the damage. Heavy smooth rollers can compact the ground which may result over time in poor drainage and suppressed grass growth. Use of a disc (Cambridge) roller is recommended since the discs will smooth out hoof prints which lead to grazing loss without compaction of the ground.
Harrowing is often used to pull out old growth or "thatch" to encourage new growth in the spring. Harrowing should be carried out in late winter or early spring before the annual growth really gets underway.

Dung

The effect disposal of dung is a important and on occasion a complicated issue to address. Dung should not be stored in an area where there is risk of runoff finding its way into a water course such as rivers, streams and ditches.

The potential for contamination of groundwater is becoming an issue that equine owners will need to become increasingly aware off. Parts of the Forest are now within a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone (NVZ) and extra measures must be taken within these areas to avoid contamination. If you are concerned about locating heaps or think you may be within an NVZ contact the New Forest Land Advice Service who will be able to provide free advice.

The high levels of nutrients found in dung heaps can damage the roots of trees and shrubs and therefore dung should not be disposed of along hedgerows or around mature trees.

As well as water courses, trees and hedges consideration should be given to ensuring that dung heaps do not cause a nuisance to houses and users of public rights of way. It should be sited where it can be conveniently accessed from both the stables and the road if it is to be collected for disposal. Ideally it should not be too close to the stables as to cause a nuisance to horses and ponies from flies.

Dung should be picked up if at all possible. Latrine areas encourage undesirable weed species, particularly nettles which thrive in areas of high nutrients, reducing the look of the paddock and the area of grazing available. Dung can also harbour parasites which will adversely affect the health of your animals.

Fertilisers

Fertilisers of any kind should not be applied to flower rich meadows or Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Healthy grass growth relies on the correct balance of potash, nitrogen and phosphates in the soil if there is a lack of any of these elements grass growth may be stunted. An application of an organic compound fertiliser may help to restore the balance of the key organic components. The BHS does not recommend the use of horse manure for fertilising pastures because of the risk of spreading parasites and the fact that it can make pastures unpalatable.

The application of artificial fertilisers should in general be avoided as these can lead to excessive grass growth which in turn can result in laminitis.

Hedgerows

Hedges provide food and shelter for a wide range of plants and animals and are important for providing shelter for horses in both summer and winter. Heavy pony or horse browsing can cause significant damage to hedges with knock on effects for wildlife and landscape. The problem of severely damaged hedges usually occurs when grazing is all but exhausted in the field; moving stock before this is the case will help to reduce impacts. Erecting protective fencing will provide protection but is expensive

and may not be practical in many circumstances. Some animals simply enjoy chewing on wood, it may be possible to make wood available for chewing provided it can be located in a safe place alternatively mineral licks can provide trace elements that livestock may be finding in the hedge.

Hedge Management

Hedge laying: This is a traditional form of management, in which stems are incompletely cut through and laid over to create a continuous hedge. The result is a dense vigourous hedge which not only looks attractive but also provides a stock proof barrier. On the down side, hedges that have been unmanaged for a long period of time may be unsuitable for this type of management and it can be very expensive. The New Forest Land Advice Service can recommend local hedge layers.

Hedge Planting: If possible try to source native British hedging plants from a local supplier. Small whips are the cheapest way to plant and the most likely to survive if we have a dry period. The best way to decide which species to choose is simply to take a look at the species already growing in the hedges in the area. These species will be adapted to the local conditions and will fit in with the landscape. The New Forest Land Advice Service can help you to choose and source your hedge plants.

Cutting: Hedges provide extremely important nesting and feeding areas for a wide range of birds and small mammals. To comply with Cross Compliance (which allows you to claim Single Farm Payment) hedges should not be cut between 31st March and 1st August. However it is much better, if you can, to try to cut hedges before the end of February and after 1st of September. If possible hedges should not be cut every year; cutting every other year will provide food for winter birds and will help the hedge recover.

The ideal profile of a hedge is an A shape, wide at the bottom and narrower at the top. Because flail mowing is often the only economically viable way of managing long sections of hedges the result has been that many hedges now resemble a line of small trees with little growth at the bottom. While it may not always be possible, try to aim for the A shaped profile.

Parasite control

Good pasture management is an integral part of parasite control. Frequent removal of dung from the pasture will reduce the potential for re-infection.

Seek the advice of your veterinary surgeon for information on the appropriate worm dosing schedule and the specific wormers to use. Parasite resistance to wormers is on the increase so careful strategic use of these products combined with monitoring of worm burdens through analysis of dung samples may be advisable – but seek professional help.

Removal of droppings during the 24 hours following treatment can also help to minimise environmental effects of some anti-parasitics.

If droppings are spread by harrowing in larger paddocks where their removal is not an option, take care to avoid spreading during warm moist weather which might allow the hatching of harmful parasites from the droppings and their consequent spread around the pasture.

To be on the safe side it would also be advisable to avoid riding through the wetland areas of the Forest within 24hours of using anti-parasitics.

Fencing

There are a range of different fencing types available and of course it is up to the land owner what they use. However there are some forms of fencing which will both serve their purpose and minimise impact on the landscape of the New Forest and its surrounding area.
For example, fencing with specially design horse netting which has tight small squares to secure a boundary will have less of a landscape impact than some other types of fencing such as post and rail. Temporary fencing will have less impact if the tape used is brown or dark green rather than white or orange.

In conclusion:

It’s always better to prevent problems from occurring by employing the appropriate stocking density for your particular land than trying to repair damage once it has occurred.

These guidelines have been compiled and produced by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust and the New Forest Land Advice Service in partnership with the New Forest Equine Forum and the New Forest National Park Authority