

## Vermont Pasture Condition Score Sheet

**This Job Sheet is adapted from the University of Maine Livestock Team Online Grazing Course.**

It was designed for use by persons with different levels of technical ability. It can be used quickly and without tools, to visually estimate the condition and trend on grasslands. For example, when it asks for a %, the user should make their best visual estimate. It reminds the user to evaluate 10 items important to grassland condition/trend. With experience, condition/trend surveys will be quite consistent between users.

Pasture Type for the site being evaluated (*permanent pasture, cultivated pasture, 1st cut hay pasture, hay/legume pasture, wet meadow, etc*). Acres can be the total acres in the field or the acres represented by the evaluation. The month and year should be recorded at M\_\_\_\_ and Y\_\_\_\_.

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### CATEGORY:

- 1) Plant Population** - Visually estimate the % composition by weight of each plant grouping and assign a weighted value. Desirable, intermediate and undesirable will vary with site, kind of grazing animal and intended use. If necessary to scientifically determine compositions by weight, use the procedure found on the following web University of Maine web site: <http://www.umaine.edu/umext/pasture/Lessons/L1/appendixE.htm>
- 2) Forage Plant Diversity** - The number of different kinds of forage plants that are well represented on the site. If only one kind of plant occurs, diversity is narrow; if six or more kinds are present, diversity is broad. With increased diversity, the pasture system is better buffered to environmental change. Diversity will change over the season.
- 3) Plant Density** - Ignore undesirables and visually estimate density of living desirable and intermediate species that would be present at a two-inch stubble. Is there room for more desirable and intermediate plants?
- 4) Plant Vigor** - Are the desirable and intermediate species healthy and growing at their potential? Some things to look for are; color, leaf area index, reproduction, presence of weeds, rate of growth and regrowth, etc.
- 5) Legumes in Stand** - Visually estimate the % composition by weight of the legumes present in the stand for the area being evaluated. Early season estimates may underestimate legumes. Bloat and nutritional issues with legumes should be considered. 30% is a good target.
- 6) Intensity of Use** - Close and frequent use causes loss of vigor, reduces desirable species, and promotes erosion and runoff. Light use allows excessive residue buildup, blocks sunlight, and reduces palatability. Undergrazing may be as detrimental as overgrazing. Light: Forage allowed to regrow often to seedhead; weeds not grazed, spotty grazing pattern. Moderate: usually associated with managed grazing; forage is maintained above 2" and is not allowed to go to seed; fairly uniform grazing pattern. Heavy: Areas of less than 70% groundcover. Overgrazed areas are evident; consistently grazed at <2".
- 7) Uniformity of Use** - Uniform grazing has all plants grazed to a moderate, uniform height throughout the field. Spotty grazing appears uneven, with some plants or parts of the field grazed heavily and others lightly. **Note: An area can be uniformly overgrazed and will not receive points.**
- 8) Soil Erosion** - Visually observe and collectively evaluate all types of erosion and determine the severity for the area being surveyed. Note areas on map with GPS unit if possible.
- 9) Woody Canopy** - Estimate the percent canopy (shaded area at noon) of woody cover over six feet tall. Woody canopy may promote uneven grazing, parasite and manure accumulation and compaction.
- 10) Plant Residue** - Appropriate residue provides adequate ground cover to retard runoff, returns nutrients to the soil, and provides a favorable microclimate for biological activity. Appropriate: 30-70% covered residue, no standing dead forage available to grazing animal. Excessive: heavy thatch (0.5"-1") present, 15-25% standing dead forage. Deficient: little or no identifiable plant residue present on soil surface.

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### VALUE:

Where needed, use weighted values and interpolate. For example; if you can't decide between a value of 2 or 3 use a value of 2.5.

**Very Poor:** Major effort in time, management and expense; needs immediate changes. **Poor:** Needs change soon; high return likely. **Good:** Improvements benefit productivity; implement the most beneficial practice(s) first. **Very Good:** Very little change in management needed but new innovations may still be appropriate.

**Further Definitions:** Desirable plants: >80% good forage plants that are readily consumed, persistent and provide high tonnage for most of the growing season. Composition of plant species is approximately the same in the diet of the target animal as that found in the area being grazed by this animal.

Undesirable plants: desirable species are < 30% of the stand, mostly weedy annuals and or woody species. Composition of plant species is lower in the diet of the target animal than is found in the area being grazed by this animal. Intermediate plant parameter: some undesirables that the livestock would not normally eat, or species when consumed provide low tonnage, lose quality fast or have short lived grazing use period (examples: plaintains, crabgrass, and annual grasses).

