



Common Misunderstandings about the Pasture Rule

The “pasture” rule is a set of new organic livestock standards and is well known for the requirement that ruminant animals such as cows, sheep, and goats intake a minimum of 30% of their dry matter from pasture. The rule is very specific and detailed, and yet there are many commonly held misunderstandings about how a farm can meet this requirement.

Misunderstanding #1: *I only have to graze for 120 days.* The rule says that animals must be grazed for the entire grazing season for the farm’s geographical location, and no less than 120 days. That means that you are expected to make the pasture season last as long as possible based on your location, the year’s weather, the lay of your land, etc. Be prepared to justify the number of days your animals are grazed.

Misunderstanding #2: *If I graze at 100% DMI from pasture for one month, the next month I don’t have to turn the cows out, because that will average out to 50%.* The overall average for your farm is calculated as an average. But because the rule says that your animals need to be grazing every day, then you can’t keep the animals off pasture and average in 0%. The rule says that livestock must have daily access to pasture for the entire grazing season, so any days “missed” on pasture need to be made up in the fall before the season runs out. You can’t have animals on pasture less than 120 days total.

Misunderstanding #3: *If I graze for 60 days at “full time” (24 hrs/day) that equals the same thing as grazing 120 days at “half time”.* The rule says that livestock must have daily access to pasture for the entire grazing season, so keeping them off pasture for half of the season is not in compliance.

Misunderstanding #4: *I don’t have to do any calculations for my dry cows, because they aren’t dry for the whole pasture season, they switch groups part way through.* It may be true that individual cows are switching groups during the grazing season, but the averages done will be on a per-group basis. Rations fed to each group need to be recorded to show that you are not feeding them more than 70% of the dry matter that they eat to any group.

Misunderstanding #5: *All my animals get 100% pasture. I don’t feed them any hay or baleage, only grain and pasture.* Actually grain contains a lot of dry matter (about 90%) so you have to figure that into your pasture calculations. If a group is to be getting 100% pasture, that means they aren’t getting any feed from you, including grain.

Misunderstanding #6: *I have to keep my cows dry matter intake above 30% for the whole summer.* Any group’s dry matter intake can fall below 30%, but that will need to be averaged up by higher figures during different points of the grazing season. The overall season’s intake from pasture figure is a weighted average for the whole summer, so some low times can average out with times of higher intake. This is why ration records are essential to show compliance with the pasture rule.

Misunderstanding #7: *My pasture is slowing down, so I’m keeping the cows off it so it can rest.* The Pasture Rule is very specific about the situations that can be permitted for not pasturing an animal. These include:

- inclement weather (violent weather that can harm livestock)
- animals’ stage of life
- health/safety/wellbeing of the animals
- risk to soil or water quality
- treatment of illness or injury
- sorting or shipping
- breeding (until bred)
- 4-H (1 week prior and 24 hrs after. Bring organic feed to the event.)
- for drying off lactating animals (1 week)
- dairy cattle up to age 6 months
- shearing for fiber animals
- for short periods for milking time
- finishing beef animals need access to pasture but are exempt from the 30% DMI requirement

If you have any questions about the pasture rule, how to calculate pasture intake, or a specific situation on your farm, please call Katie Webb at MOFGA Certification. We are happy to help answer your questions, and we are happy to see farms doing their best to understand and meet the requirements of the pasture rule.