

Hay is Cheap, Land is Valuable

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Why do you live in the country? Clean air? Open space? Scenic vistas? Wildlife viewing? Raising animals? These are all good reasons, and likely you enjoy some, if not all, of these benefits of rural life. Another benefit of rural living can be the appreciating value of your property. With a growing interest in rural living, property values in many areas have seen steady and notable increases the past few years. Many of the values of rural land are bound to the aesthetics of that land and all of the amenities listed above are commonly associated with property value. Landowners need to maintain these aesthetics not only for the benefit of their enjoyment but also to protect the investment in the property.

When it comes to growing forage, grass and other plants eaten by grazing livestock, many Arizona regions that have great beauty and make desirable home sites are not very productive without supplemental irrigation. The photos illustrate land with two different potentials for producing forage. When estimating how many animals can graze on your land, it is always better to error on the side of caution. It is unlikely to damage your land by not grazing it enough, but you can severely damage it by overgrazing heavily and repeatedly grazing plants until they succumb. Your ability to manage grazing animals by rotating them among various pastures, the distance to their water, and the timing of grazing will affect carrying capacity (the maximum amount of grazing animals that your land can support without harming the vegetation and soil resources) and reduce overgrazing. Good grazing management does not mean that every blade of grass that is growing on the property should be grazed. It means managing grazing so that the land is either maintaining or improving in condition. Pastures should look patchy and rough after being grazed, not scalped. If your animals are continually grazing pastures down to short stubble with lots of bare ground showing through you may want to rethink your grazing and consider feeding hay instead.

A common sustainable production level for upland, non-irrigated rangeland sites in Arizona is 5 to 10 acres to produce enough forage to sustain a horse or cow for one month. However, depending on soils, range condition and elevation, carrying capacity can vary widely from around 3 to 50 acres to sustain a horse or cow for one month. Cows and other ruminants eat about 2 percent of their body weight in a day, while horses can eat one and a half times that much. Therefore, a horse that weighs 1100 pounds will eat about 670 pounds of hay in a month. At \$9.50 per each 120 pound bale of hay, the eight acres it would take to produce forage for the month could be replaced by around 53 dollars of hay. Therefore, the gross productive value of many land sites is less than \$7/acre/year. It may be unwise to risk degrading property values



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for such a low return. Additionally, smaller acreage rural homesites are rarely large or productive enough to allow unrestricted year long grazing by even one horse or cow. Is it really worth saving a little bit on hay to overgraze your land? Keeping the animals in a corral and feeding hay is often a much better solution for the health of your land, the watershed and habitat values, not to mention the investment in your property.

If you are still not convinced it is cheaper to buy hay than to overgraze a pasture, there are other factors to consider. Weeds – The number one enemy to weeds is competition. A good, healthy stand of perennial grasses and other vegetation will prevent most weed problems. Getting rid of weeds is expensive and time consuming. Preventing weed problems can be as simple as managing for the health of native grasses and other plants. Soil – Bare ground that is exposed by overgrazing is more susceptible to wind and water erosion than soils that are covered with plants. Animal Health – Horses and other livestock will generally avoid eating poisonous plants if they have a choice. Overgrazing increases the chance your animals will eat something harmful.

Living in rural communities can be enhanced by properly managing the landscapes that attracted development in the first place. Feeding animals hay rather than letting them graze continually on small acreage homesites can maintain native plants and animals and improve the quality of life for all.