

Grazing Plan Writers Guide and Resources - GrassWorks January 2026



Introduction

This document outlines the steps required to write a grazing plan following Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) standards. To meet NRCS standards, a plan writer must be certified. Wisconsin guidelines for certification can be found here:

[WI NRCS Grazing Management Plan Writer Certification Process](#)

Each state may have somewhat different requirements, but following these guidelines will generate a grazing plan that will meet national standards for Grazing Conservation Activity Plans (CAP 110). They are intended to assist grazing plan writers in finding the information and resources needed to write a high-quality grazing plan. Assembling this plan and accompanying resources will assist both the grazer and the agency(s) they are working with to develop a shared understanding of goals and establish a pathway to achieve them. An example plan can be found [here](#). A tip sheet for writing a grazing plan can be found [here](#).

Background resources for conservation planning

These documents provide the underlying structure and background information for all NRCS grazing plans, no matter what state you're working in:

- [USDA-NRCS Planning Procedures Handbook](#)

The resources used in grazing planning are subject to change. Our goal is to keep links active and updated, but we also provide a full folder of templates, guidance documents, and additional resources at this Google drive link: [GrassWorks Grazing Planning Resources Folder](#). Many of the forms and documents can also be found on the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) website under Section 3: Resource Concerns and Planning Criteria/Conservation Planning Tools/Grazing at [this link](#). Check with your local NRCS office or with Wisconsin NRCS State Grazing Specialist Adam Abel (adam.abel@usda.gov) to ensure the materials you are using are current.

Elements of a Grazing Plan

In addition to guiding a producer in the adoption of managed grazing, a completed grazing plan describes resource concerns that the producer and agency seek to address. The Grazing Plan narrative describes proposed stocking rates based on soil types and forage yield estimates, documents resource concerns, outlines the desired rotation scenario, and lays out infrastructure that achieves rotation goals and protects critical and sensitive areas. Documentation to be

submitted include the items are listed below. Use this [Grazing Planning Checklist](#) to ensure you have included all required information.

1. Grazing plan narrative using template provided
2. Forage-animal balance worksheet
3. Documentation of all interactions with the client while the plan is being developed (“Six Notes” or other format)
4. Resource concern assessments, such as Pasture Condition Scoresheet and Infield Soil Health Assessment
5. Maps:
 - a. Soils Map
 - b. Conservation Plan Map(s) showing Planned Practices
 - c. Critical and Sensitive Area Map
 - d. Forage Suitability Group Map
 - e. Other maps as needed

Generating maps

Maps may be made using ArcGIS, QGIS ([How to create a QGIS Project](#)) or other mapping programs. QGIS is a free version of the ArcGIS software.

Grazing Planning Guidelines

Grazing Plan Narrative Template

The Wisconsin NRCS Grazing Plan Template provides a framework for the narrative portion of the grazing plan. Additional documents and maps are submitted with the plan in the Addendum section. The Wisconsin Grazing Plan Template can be found in the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) in Section 3 - Conservation Planning Tools - Pasture .

Link in FOTG*: [FOTG Grazing Folder](#)

Template in [GrassWorks Grazing Planning Resources Folder](#)

* If you have issues with opening the PDF, [here's a way to troubleshoot.](#)

Cover page

Every box on this page must be filled out completely. The completed grazing plan must be reviewed and signed off on by the planner and the NRCS prior to being delivered to and signed by the participant/client. NRCS must review the plan to ensure it meets practice standards prior to being agreed to by the producer.

- **Participant/Client Information:**
 - Provide client's Name, Address, Phone Number, Email, County and State Legal Description (Township - T,R,Sec)

- Legal Descriptions can be obtained from the NRCS/FSA Field Office that you're working with.
 - County websites are another source for detailed property descriptions.
- **TSP Information:**
Provide your Name, Address, Phone Number, Email, TSP Number, TSP Expiration Date, County, and State of Service
- **TSP/Grazing Planner, Client, NRCS Statements and signatures:**
- Statement by ***TSP or Grazing Planner*** that services provided:
 - Comply with all applicable Federal, State, Tribal and local laws, and requirements
 - Meet applicable NRCS standards, specifications, and program requirements
 - Are consistent with the conservation program goals and objectives for which the program contract was entered into by the client
 - Incorporate alternatives that are both cost effective and appropriate to address the resource issues
 - TSP or Grazing Planner certification statement:
 - Signature and date
- ***Client acceptance statement:***
 - A statement that the plans and specifications adequately represent existing conditions and the selected preliminary design alternatives, and the client understands and will abide by the operation and maintenance plans.
 - Signature of the client and date the client received the plans
- Block for ***NRCS reviewer acceptance*** (to be completed by NRCS)

Body of Narrative

Note: you may want to include a table of contents to provide readers with an easy guide to plan elements.

Producer Goals

Summarize the client's goals for their operation, their livestock, and their land and resources. Identify type and class of livestock to be grazed. Multiple goals are likely: Is the goal to improve pasture production and efficiency, develop a pasture system from cropland or to manage the forage for wildlife, etc? Summarize briefly in bullet points or a concise paragraph (one to three sentences).

Grazing Plan Narrative

Describe the operation, existing situation, and history of the land and facilities. Include descriptions of the existing type, class and number of animal(s) and planned changes in livestock type, class or numbers. Other information that should be described in this section includes: the current management of the site, the type of grazing system the client plans to adopt, the number of acres available for grazing, and the type of grazing system to be adopted including frequency of moves and length of rest period planned. Describe the infrastructure that currently exists and what new infrastructure is planned. Identify any potential impacts on adjacent landowners or surrounding landscape.

Resources for planning fencing and layout:

- [Fencing Layout Fact Sheet: 15 Tips for Designing Fencing Systems for Managed Grazing](#) - UW-Madison Division of Extension
- [Pasture Management System Layout](#) - NRCS Illinois
- [Pastures for Profit](#) - UW-Madison Division of Extension Learning Store

Animal Kind/Class

This section includes a table to be filled out with numbers of existing kinds and classes of livestock and their daily forage intake. A second table summarizes the numbers of planned kinds and classes and their daily forage intake. Use the producer's estimates for animal weights or [this Carrying Capacity calculator fact sheet](#) has a table of estimated weights by animal type and class. Forage intake estimates are based on 4% of body weight intake of forage dry matter daily per head. They may be calculated using the forage animal balance sheet described below.

Stocking Rate

Stocking rate is the centerpiece of the grazing plan. Getting these calculations right creates a foundation for the client's success. This section includes a brief description of the stocking rate and how it was derived for this farm. Provide an estimate of the amount of forage dry matter the soils of the site can produce, the planned stocking rate, and the total land required for the herd or flock size being planned. Describe paddock residency period, average paddock size, and target residual goal. There are several worksheets or calculators that can be used to develop answers to these questions.

In addition to a paragraph describing the stocking rate and how it was derived, documentation for the **Stocking Rate** section includes several items that are included in the addendum: the 'forage animal balance' worksheet, the forage suitability group map, and the soil map.

Resources for determining stocking rate

- [Calculating Carrying Capacity](#) - UW-Madison Division of Extension Publication
- [Prescribed Grazing Plan Worksheet](#)
W Copy of Stocking wrksht-rotational_current.docx
- Forage Animal Balance spreadsheet in [FOTG Grazing Folder](#)

Process for determining stocking rate

Forage Availability.

Determine the estimated forage production capacity of the land.

To determine forage availability, use estimates derived from NRCS Forage Suitability Groups (FSG) using the USDA NRCS [Web Soil Survey](#). Maps of soil types and FSGs should be included in the Addendum. Estimated forage yield by FSG can be found using the [Wisconsin Forage Suitability Group Guide](#) or using the [Forage Suitability Groups Resource](#) on the NRCS Wisconsin Field Office Technical Guide. Other sources of forage yield estimates include historic hay or pasture yields from the producer. If there is existing well-managed pasture, taking clipped samples from the current growing season will provide the most accurate estimate.

Total Forage Demand.

Overall forage demand is recorded in the Animal Kind/Class table in the plan template for existing flock/herd forage needs (if applicable), as well as the planned flock/herd forage demand. These numbers are determined by totalling the weight of the flock/herd and multiplying by 4%. It is assumed that animals will consume approximately 2.5% of their body weight in forage dry weight each day. The remaining 1.5% provides a buffer for forage trampling and waste.

Stocking Rate.

To determine stocking rate, forage availability is divided by forage demand. This gives you overall stocking rate. Use one of the worksheets, which incorporate forage yield, forage demand, paddock occupancy period (days or hours), rest period, and season length (months) to determine stocking density and paddock size. The results of these calculations are entered into the four acreage and tonnage boxes in the stocking rate table.

Forage Species Inventory

To conduct a forage species inventory, two processes are used: the Step Point method to document species composition and the pasture condition score sheet to document the health

and vigor of the pasture. These assessments should be conducted separately for each section of pasture or management unit. A management unit is an area of land that has uniform soil types, species composition and topography that can be managed similarly. See [Fencing Layout Fact Sheet: 15 Tips for Designing Fencing Systems for Managed Grazing](#) for more information on establishing management units. These management units should be named or numbered and identified on one of the plan maps. Refer to their name or number in your description of species composition so the reader is able to connect locations on the map with descriptions. In addition to summarizing species composition and documenting the current condition and productivity of the stand, use the data to identify specific management goals for each management unit in this section. Step point data and pasture condition scoresheets should be included in the Addendum.

Resources for Forage Species Inventory

- [Step Point How To and Worksheet](#)
- [Pasture Condition Scoresheet - NRCS](#)
- [FOTG folder of pasture assessment resources](#)
- [Identifying Pasture Grasses](#)
- [Identifying Pasture Legumes](#)
- [Forage Grass ID](#)
- [WI NRCS Desirable Plants List](#)

Pasture Management

For each season, there are important management considerations that should be discussed with the grazer and included in the grazing plan. The spring, summer, fall, and winter seasons listed below may not align with the calendar. They should reflect the timing of seasonal management activities. This section of the grazing plan narrative summarizes planned management strategies specific to the operation's type and class of livestock. If incorporating cropland into the grazing plan, consider using cover crops and annual forages in addition to perennial forages as part of the forage supply. This [Grazing Cover Crops and Annual Forages fact sheet](#) covers information on species selection, seeding rates and grazing times.

Resources for seasonal management planning

- [Use a Grazing Stick to Create a Pasture Inventory](#) - UW-Madison Extension
- Resources for seasonal management of pastures:
 - [Pastures for Profit](#)
 - [UW Extension Managed Grazing website](#)

Spring Management

Spring management sets the stage for seasonal pasture growth. Write a paragraph that includes topics related to early season grazing practices as well as overall management goals. Examples of early season grazing management topics include: the forage height or leaf stage used to determine when livestock should be put on pasture, how much land will be required in the spring due to shorter rest periods and faster growth, and how spring mud season will be managed. Overall management decisions include: whether clipping or hay harvested will be done and on which paddocks, determining which pastures are needing renovation and how they will be renovated, and how the producer will manage bloat if it occurs.

Resources for spring grazing management

- [When can I start grazing?](#)
- [Spring Pasture Weed Management](#)
- [Renovating Cool-Season Pastures](#)
- [Interseeding legumes into pastures](#)

Summer Management

This section describes routine management for the main part of the grazing season. Write a paragraph that includes topics such as additional acreage needed as growth slows and rest periods lengthen out, what pre- and post-grazing heights will be targeted, and under what conditions it is important to leave higher residual heights after grazing. Also describe which paddocks will be harvested for hay (if applicable), and planning for clipping to remove seedheads or control weeds. Other seasonal management decisions include which paddocks will be set aside for stockpiling (if applicable) and how they will be prepared (clipping, fertilization), and contingency plans for drought conditions (i.e. where stored feed will be fed, how the summer drought sacrifice area will be managed).

Resources for summer management

- [Should I clip my pastures?](#)
- [Managing rust in cool season pastures](#)
- [Stockpile Grazing: a strategy for extending the grazing season](#)

Fall Management

Fall management goals may include extending the grazing season as long as possible as well as setting up pastures for the next season's grazing. Write a paragraph covering topics including: How long animals will stay on pastures in the fall, when stockpiled pasture will begin to be grazed, and for how long. Describe how wet or muddy conditions will be handled at the end of the growing season. Describe pre- and post-grazing target heights for fall grazing and

target residual height to protect pasture plants through the winter. Plans for transition from pasture to winter feeding should be covered in this section.

Resources for Fall Management

- [Stockpile Grazing: a strategy for extending the grazing season](#)
- [Extending grazing and reducing stored feed needs](#)

Winter Management

As much or more planning needs to go into preparing for winter livestock feeding. In a concise paragraph, describe sources for winter feed, including made on site or purchased. Discuss housing or overwintering plans for the non-growing season. If overwintering, explain plans for bale grazing or sacrifice paddock, including the acreage needed. Describe plans for provision of water during freezing weather. Describe preparations for additional protection during extreme cold, windy, or snowy conditions and what type of protection will be provided. Use resource concern assessments to determine how critical and sensitive areas will be protected during the non-growing season. Refer to the Critical and Sensitive Areas Checklist for details.

Resources for Winter Management

- [Bale grazing: a winter feeding strategy](#)
- [Watering Systems for Serious Graziers - Missouri NRCS publication](#)
- [Critical and Sensitive Areas checklist in FOTG](#)
- [Fact sheet on grazing to protect critical and sensitive areas](#)

Planned Pasture Improvements

The primary practice for grazed pasture or converted cropland acres is Managed Grazing, as described in practice standard #528. This is a complex practice to plan and apply. Proper management of the number, type, and class of livestock on pastures is necessary to maintain the desired plant community and composition while meeting the needs of the livestock and the producer's goals.

Planned primary and supporting practices are described in this section with appropriate discussion/documentation on how the management will be achieved. Primary practices must have a documented resource concern. All practices planned are also listed in the practice schedule section later in the Grazing Plan Template.

All practices including managed grazing, fences, pipelines, watering facilities, pasture and hayland planting, etc. need to be installed according to practice standards to ensure success. If the grazing planner does not have adequate job approval, they must engage a planner or technician that has the appropriate training to assist with the design to ensure that the proposed

practices are feasible and planned properly. NRCS and/or County Land Conservation staff may be able to provide the technical assistance needed for planning, design and implementation.

Resources for Planned Pasture Improvements

- All practice standards are located in the Wisconsin Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) in the [Conservation Practice Standards subfolder](#).
- [What should I plant in my pasture?](#)
- [Interseeding legumes](#)
- [Renovating cool season pastures for improved grazing](#)
- [Soil fertility in grazing systems](#)

Emergency Management Plan

In this section, describe strategies you've discussed with the producer for dealing with adverse conditions. Any type of severe weather that affects livestock health, forage production and availability, or pasture health should be dealt with, including excessive heat, drought conditions, snowstorms, extreme cold, or heavy rain events. In addition, this section may include other issues, such as power outages or disease outbreaks. Include information on local veterinary resources, including contact information.

Resources for Emergency Management Planning

- [Managing Pastures in Drought Conditions](#)

Weed and Brush Management

This section should identify management units that have weed and brush management resource concerns. Include both short and long-term management strategies. For pasture establishment scenarios, describe how weeds will be managed in new seedings or prior to planting. For existing pastures with herbaceous weeds and/or woody encroachment describe the initial control procedures. For the long-term management, explain how herbaceous weeds and woody vegetation will be controlled. Possible strategies include routine clipping, mob grazing, or the use of selective herbicides (NRCS does not make recommendations on herbicides, but this information may be available through University Extension or a local ag supplier). Long term monitoring of the site should be done using step point and the pasture condition scoresheet to assess the effectiveness of weed and brush management strategies.

Resources for Weed and Brush Management

- [Spring Pasture Weed Management](#)
- Use your [Pasture Condition Scoring](#) and/or [Step-point worksheet](#) assessment to identify weed issues.

- [PCS and Step Point resources on FOTG](#)
- [Dirty Dozen Pasture Weeds - PDF](#)
- [Toxic Plants in Wisconsin Pastures](#)
- UW Extension Weed Science [Pasture Weed Resource Webpage](#)

Animal Handling Facilities

Discuss with the producer what facilities they have and/or need for handling their livestock and describe the plan in this section. The producer must plan for a means of treating sick animals and carrying out routine herd health activities such as vaccinations and pregnancy checks. If there are no facilities or if existing facilities are inadequate, describe plans for locating and constructing an appropriate facility for the type and class of livestock. Site facility outside of critical and sensitive areas to avoid creating resource concerns. Plans may include portable and/or stationary handling facilities (squeeze chute), holding areas (fence), watering facilities, lanes (animal trails and walkways), or access roads.

Resources for Animal Handling Facilities

- [15 Tips for Effective Cattle Handling in Grazing Systems](#)

On-Site Equipment

This section describes the equipment available through ownership, rental or custom hire to carry out the grazing plan and the strategy for accomplishing tasks if/when equipment is unavailable. Types of equipment that may be needed include hay making equipment, a bale wrapper, a brush hog for clipping pastures, an ATV to assist with livestock movement, tractor or skidsteer with a spear for handling hay bales, or a manure spreader if livestock are yarded or housed in winter.

Sensitive Areas

Critical and sensitive areas must be described in narrative format in the grazing plan template and documented with maps and the Critical and Sensitive Areas Checklist. The Grazing Plan Template includes descriptions of the most common critical and sensitive areas for managed grazing systems. Customize the list to include only the ones that are applicable, and add to or modify the text to describe them more accurately. The narrative description must include how these areas will be managed to protect the resources associated with them. Include supporting documentation in the Addendum.

Resources for Sensitive Areas

- [Critical and Sensitive Areas Checklist](#), also [on FOTG](#).

- [Grazing to Protect Surface Water: considering critical and sensitive areas](#)

Practice Schedule

Two tables in this section are provided to list all existing practices and those that are planned to be installed or adopted as part of the grazing plan. Per NRCS Conservation Planning Policy, all aspects of the tables must be filled out. The tables include columns for FSA Tract Number and field numbers (or other location designations). The “Practice Code and Name” column includes all planned practices (refer to the [NRCS Conservation Practice Standards webpage](#)). A corresponding map should reference tract and field numbers and locations of all planned practices. Under the “Description” column, include a brief description including types and amounts of materials (e.g. XX feet of 3 strand high tensile electric fencing, XX acres of pasture seeding, or XX feet of surface water pipeline). Planned materials amounts should be measured using ArcPro GIS, CAD, or other mapping software. Discussion should be held with the producer to determine estimated installation dates. Include these dates in the “Planned Date” column of the practice schedule.

Resource Concern Inventory

Resource concerns are the basis for NRCS grazing planning and cost-sharing. A property must have at least one resource concern that will be addressed through implementation of the managed grazing plan. In this section, laid out in table format, resource concerns are listed, including documentation of how they were measured or assessed and what assessment tools were used. The planning criteria column describes the threshold for determining presence/absence of resource concerns. The “Assessment Tools and Measured Field Inventory” column is where the planner documents results of field assessments from the site. See the National and Wisconsin Resource Concern Planning Criteria for guidance on this topic. Resource concern assessments should be included in the Addendum.

Resources for the Resource Concern Inventory

- [National Resource Concern List and Planning Criteria](#)
- [Wisconsin Resource Concern Planning Criteria](#) (spreadsheet)
- Assessment tools for pastures:
 - [NRCS Guide to Pasture Condition Scoring](#)
 - [Step-point worksheet](#)
 - [Infield Soil Health Assessment Guide](#)
- Assessment tools for cropland:
 - [Infield Soil Health Assessment Guide](#)
 - [Assessment tool for cropland carbon stocks](#)
 - [Residue, Crop Rotation/Tillage & Organic Matter Rating Tool](#)

- [SnapPlus](#) nutrient management planning free software may be used to document erosion, nutrient issues and other resource concerns on cropland.

Soils and Forage Suitability Group(s)

All soils present on the property should be listed in this section including their code and full soil name. A soils map should be included in the Addendum. An abbreviated version of the soil report from Web Soil Survey should also be included in the Addendum.

This section should also include descriptions and maps showing forage suitability group(s) present on the property. Descriptions of each Forage Suitability group are available as dropdowns in this section. These forage suitability groups provide estimates of potential pasture yields that may be used to calculate stocking rate.

Resources for Soils and Forage Suitability Groups

- Use the [USDA Web Soil Survey tool](#) to generate maps of soil types and forage suitability groups.
- [Wisconsin Forage Suitability Groups](#) descriptions
- [Forage Suitability Groups Chart](#) for southern Wisconsin. Note that this chart has forage yield estimates appropriate for southern Wisconsin pastures. If the site is in northern Wisconsin, it is recommended that production estimates should be reduced by ½ ton per acre.

Monitoring Plan

Monitoring is used to assess whether the grazing strategy described in the Grazing Plan is meeting the producer's goals and having the desired effect on natural resources. Monitoring can also quantify the effects of management on the forage yield and quality at a specific location and time. Work with the producer to establish a monitoring program that is easy for both natural resources personnel and the producer to use. The monitoring plan is the method agreed to by the producer, planner and NRCS that will assess whether implementation of the grazing management plan meets NRCS standards and specifications.

A Monitoring Program includes:

1. Defining monitoring objectives.
2. Determining monitoring techniques
3. Selecting monitoring sites
4. Collecting and recording data
5. Interpreting data
6. Refining management strategy

Resources for developing a monitoring plan

- In FOTG: [Monitoring and Record Keeping guidelines](#)

Operation and Management

This section should include a description that guides the operator on how the grazing system is to be managed. It includes operation and maintenance requirements from NRCS conservation practice standards. Suggested statements are available as dropdowns in this section. You are not limited to these statements. Include any other management guidelines agreed to by the producer. Some of these statements may already be included in other sections of the plan or may be cut and pasted into those sections as appropriate.

Addendum

At the end of the grazing plan, include a list of attached maps and documents in the order they are referred to in the text. Then attach them to the finalized plan in that order.

Documentation of producer-TSP interaction

Include in the Addendum documentation of your conservation assistance notes. These notes include all correspondence, visits and conversations with the producer. They can be compiled using the NRCS form: Conservation Assistance Notes ([NRCS-CPA-6](#)) or other typed or hand-written format. Include documentation of the following:

- The client's objectives
- Each interaction with the client, include notes and results of that interaction, date, and initials of the TSP
- Each site visit, activity in the field, results of each site visit, all parties present, date and initials of the TSP
- Any correspondence between the TSP and the client relating to the development of the Grazing Management Plan

Minimum requirement for documentation to be included in the Addendum

- Animal/Forage Balance Worksheet
- Site-level resource inventory and assessment:
 - WI Planning Criteria
 - Approved inventory tools that document resource concerns
- MAPS
 - Soils Map

- Conservation Plan Maps showing Planned Practices
- Critical and Sensitive Area Map
- Forage Suitability Map

Acknowledgement:

This material is based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under agreement number 2022-38640-37486 through the North Central Region SARE program under project number SUBA00001575 H009987601. USDA is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and should not be construed to represent any official USDA or U.S. Government determination or policy.

