As the warm weather returns, many producers will send their herds out to graze. That is actually part of the today’s projects here at our farm in Illinois. As we prepare for movement though, I am again reminded of both the benefits of a well-maintained pasture and the risks attributed to them as well. As producers, it is important to go over the basic pasture use checklist before we turn any of our goats out to browse.

Walk the pastures: While goats in many regards are tough, there are many plants or objects that can kill a goat if consumed at the right stage of growth, in the right quantity, or in general. Many poisonous plants in particular start to establish themselves early in a growing season. Removing such plants from the pastures early can help reduce future spread of the plants and may save an overeager goats’ life in the process. In addition, winter winds often blow trash into pastures and damage fences with snow and tree limbs. Checking the pasture fences prior to pasture use may save you additional time catching loose goats down the road.

Grass Tetany: While uncommon in goats compared to other ruminants, grass tetany should always be a consideration in the spring. Early rapid growth forages are generally low in magnesium and high in potassium. Grass Tetany is caused by low magnesium intake or absorption and can be very progressive in its symptoms. Symptoms include; grazing away from the herd, irritability, muscle twitching, staring, incoordination, staggering, collapse, thrashing, head thrown back, and coma followed by death. Unfortunately, not all cases express symptoms prior to death. The solution thankfully is quite simple. Make sure your free choice mineral or mineral supplement offered has a sufficient amount of magnesium, and that consumption rates are consistent. The risks of grass tetany drop off dramatically as plants mature and the season progresses.

Internal Parasites: Prior to turning goats out into any pasture, fecal testing, and/or Famacha checks should be done on each goat. Any goat with sufficient parasite load to require worming should be wormed and kept out of the pasture for at least 21 days post worming. In doing so, we can reduce the overall worm populations we introduce into a pasture and therefore lower the risks to other goats that will be browsing the same ground. Set up your herd for a successful summer by checking parasites before you start browsing and periodically as the season progresses. It may be beneficial to copper bolus each goat before turning them out as well if copper boluses are part of your parasite management program.

Feet: It stands to reason that if we expect our goats to move and browse effectively, they need to have good mobility and feet. Take the time to trim any feet that require it and check for hoof rot or scald at the same time. If a goat’s mobility is hindered, they will not succeed in a pasture situation without additional problems arising or supplements required.

Overall Health: As a final check on your checklist, take time to check your vaccine, treatment, and feeding records. Consider updating any vaccines that are due as you check for other obvious issues. If goats have recently been treated recently, reevaluate the progress of their ailment. Check your feeding records as well for animals that required more nutrition over the winter to consider their overall feed efficiency in your herd and the burden they may cause while out to pasture. Other issues may include anything from bad teeth, to external parasites such as mites or lice. If a goat is fighting a health or physical battle before they are turned out you will see such problems exacerbated by pasture life.

As we celebrate the return of warmer weather and the benefits of returning pasture growth, it is important to make sure the pasture season is set up to be a good one. As we spend the time to check and prepare, we will be much more likely see positive rates of return from our pastures. As always, spending a little on prevention may save us much on problems. Stay safe out there and happy browsing!