The Derwent Catchment Project
Increasing Productivity. Restoring Landscapes

Pasture condition scoring

Pasture condition scoring is a tool we can use to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of any pasture. Taking the time to assess pasture condition encourages our critical observation of the pasture resource and its value. Taking note of what we see provides a measure that can inform management options provides a record for the future.

To assess pasture condition we use a subjective scale of 1 to 5, just as we might with livestock.

Score 1 represents pasture that is in low condition and weak. Pasture in this score may not be dependable or productive. It is least desirable relative to the potential of the paddock.

Score 5 represents pasture that is robust, vigorous and productive. It is the most desirable state, relative to the potential of the site.

Note: Considering the context of pasture type and position in the landscape is necessary to acknowledge that what makes a good pasture in one place may simply not be possible in another.

Assessing pasture condition should take account of a range of pasture characteristics.

1. **Ground cover**. This is the percentage of the soil surface area covered by something, and not exposed bare ground. Ground cover includes plant bases, leaves, plant litter and dung. Ground cover reduces soil erosion and increases the amount of rainfall retained in soil. Both runoff and evaporation can be dramatically reduced with good ground cover. It also protects against weed invasion.
2. **Species composition and desirability**. Different species of plants offer individual strengths and weakness that make them desirable or not. In improved pasture, the sown species are generally desirable and weedy invaders are undesirable. Some weed species are less desirable than others. Species composition significantly affects productivity and grazing value.
3. **Clover percentage**. Clovers are a component of pasture species that deserve separate mention to acknowledge their special role in supplying nitrogen to the pasture and protein and high-quality feed to livestock. To be effective, however, there must be sufficient clover leaf production per ha, per year. A commonly stated target for clover is 30% of growing season contribution. Clover presence, though, tends to be very visible and is easily overestimated. You can always cut and check, or pluck and check.
4. **Plant density**. Plant density is a key determinant of a pasture's production potential. While there will be trade-offs between the number and size of plants, having enough growing shoots per unit area to make best use the available resources is the goal.

5. **Plant health and vigour**. A judgment on the strength, health and vigor of the population of plants comprising the pasture can be informed by assessing their colour, growth habit, number of live shoots, percentage of green material and leaf size. While this assessment should take into account the impact of season and growth stage of the pasture, there will often be evidence of plant strength, weakness or stress.
6. **Pasture feed on offer and feed quality**. The pasture mass, the proportion of green and dead, leaf and stem, each affect the pasture's suitability for meeting livestock requirements but also directly affect current and future pasture growth. The mass of pasture present is an important attribute of current pasture condition and value. Typically phase 2 of the pasture growth curve (1200–2500 kgDM/ha) represents a sweet spot for pasture growth rate.

Having looked critically at the pasture, you can combine the individual descriptions into an overall pasture condition score. You can use the score to:

- identify how best to use the pasture in its current state, with fitness for purpose firmly in mind
- plan how the current pasture condition and its capability to grow fits into the grazing plan for the season and seasons ahead
- establish the current status of the pasture so you can monitor change – seeing change can alert us to the impacts that management decisions are having on the pasture resource
- identify what features of the pasture we may wish to change, or retain, and consider what management will be required to achieve this.

In summary: Assessing pasture condition is a simple technique that can help us understand the relative merit of the pasture resources being managed. This information provides a grounding to our expectations, making them realistic, but also helps us plan how we can best use and improve a particular pasture and the pasture base as a whole.

Considering the pivotal role pasture management plays in the success of a grazing enterprise, taking an informed and critical look at the pasture resource is a very cost effective and worthy investment.

You can begin by using the scoring sheet on the next page.

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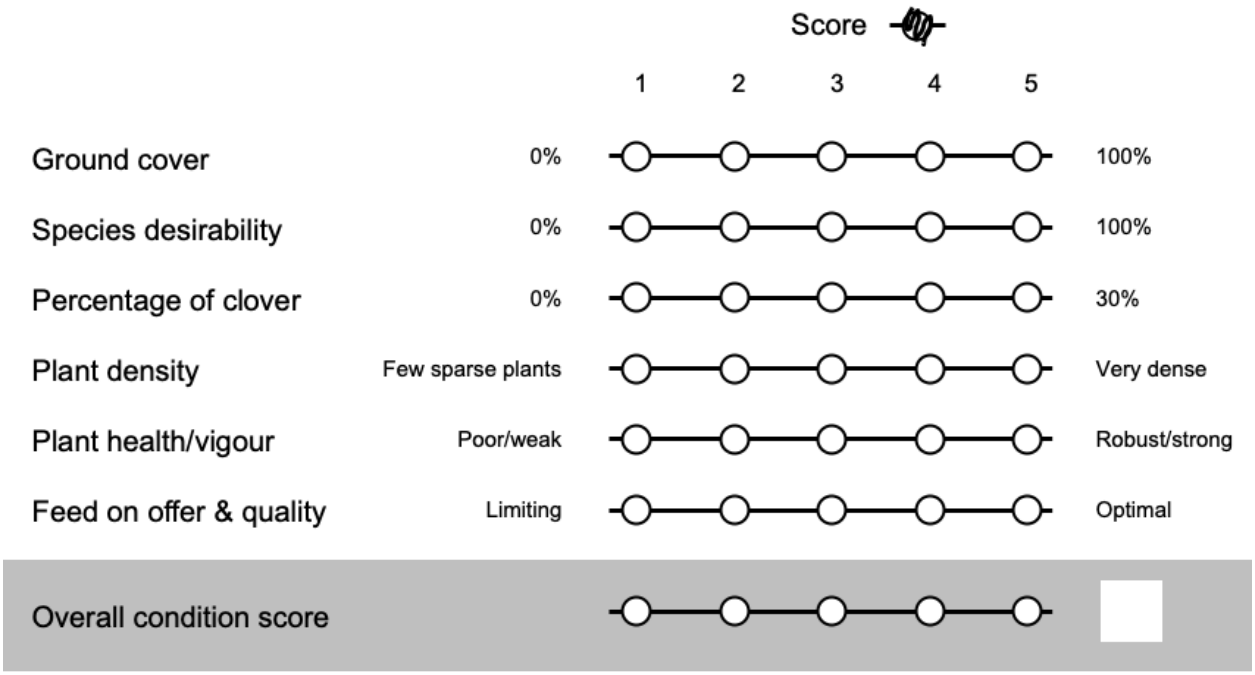
Pasture condition score sheet

Paddock ID:

Date:



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