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# Managed Grazing: Learn Quickly, Fail Cheaply and Maintain Flexibility

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“Learn quickly, fail cheaply, maintain flexibility and listen to your livestock,” is the advice from pasture range consultant Hugh Aljoe, Director of Producer Relations at Noble Research Institute. Making the most of every acre of forage requires you to be part nutritionist, agronomist, ecologist and animal behaviorist.

“Maintaining flexibility is crucial to your success.”

Managing grazing is rooted in science while being an art in practice. You are managing livestock as much as you are managing forages. Go in with a plan yet remain flexible making adjustments as needed is key to success Aljoe points out. Your individual plan, subject to the whims of mother nature, will vary according to the livestock being grazed, their nutritional needs at that time, and your end goals.

Plants that are actively growing above ground are actively growing below ground says Aljoe. Allowing plants to reach optimal maturity and flush provides the greatest advantage to livestock and soils. We have all heard you should graze just the top half (or less) of the plant. Aljoe notes this is important in part because grazing less than half of the leaf portion of the plant enables roots to continually grow. Healthy root systems support increased soil biology and overall soil health.

What many people do not realize is “when grass is continually overgrazed roots die back and the whole system begins to break down” says Aljoe. The soils heat up and dry out when vegetation is removed from long-term overgrazing. Living organisms that run the soil biology die along with the root system. Once overgrazed it takes 3 to 6 weeks for growing plants to recover and roots to regrow and function normally if deferred from grazing.

Timely forage management extends the vegetative phase of plants encouraging growth and increasing the quality of forage leading to better quality nutrition and increased tonnage. The end result is better livestock performance



Increasing not only the production of your pastures but also the quality of forage can be accomplished by maintaining adequate residuals, allowing adequate recovery, adjusting stocking rates to match current forage conditions and maintaining flexibility according to Aljoe. Maintaining adequate residuals in all grazed pastures throughout the year is vital. Aljoe points out that introduced pastures need to be managed differently than native range. “A residual height of at least 6 inches in native range pastures and 3 inches in introduced pastures should always be maintained. Managing residuals enhances pasture productivity by insulating the ground from high temperatures, maintaining plant vigor and resiliency, and allowing more water infiltration during rainfall events.”

including increased weaning weights, better body condition, and increased conception rates. There is no doubt time and effort spent managing forages will positively impact your bottom line.



Allowing rest for optimal recovery of pasture will greatly improve native pastures. “The recovery process for native range pastures begins with rest during the growing season. When possible, rest (do not graze) a targeted pasture for the entire grazing season. Graze the pasture during winter, leaving adequate residual and ground cover. Another scenario would be to graze native pastures through early summer then defer grazing from July until after frost. Improving introduced forage species typically requires more active management (fertilizer and weed control) with rest periods of about 30 days between grazing events. Most introduced pastures are considered more resilient due to the rapid recovery capabilities with

active management.”

Aljoe notes, “Carrying capacity is often over estimated. Stocking rates need to fluctuate with the forage production. Good graziers should know the carrying capacity in good and bad years having a contingency plan ready to adjust stocking rates when needed.” High stocking rates often lead to removing too much forage, reduced livestock performance, and reduced profitability. Correct stocking rates vary for each pasture depending on soils, topography, forages, precipitation and seasonal fluctuations in weather.

“There is no known "magical" stock density value that expedites the desired outcomes, but the greater the stock density then the greater the herd impact,” says Aljoe.



Maintaining flexibility is crucial to your success. A flexible grazing plan allows you to make adjustments as needed to

benefit your forages, soils and livestock. Aljoe encourages several practices that will help you to maintain a flexible grazing plan. Keeping as few groups of stock as possible will simplify the process. Developing watering stations will increase options to divide pastures. Understanding that livestock utilize pasture unevenly will assist you in making choices. Stock tend to graze upland areas and hill tops more heavily leaving the more productive lowlands underutilized. Strategically placed temporary fencing allows you to concentrate the livestock in these underutilized areas of pastures while restricting their access to overgrazed areas.



Determine underutilized areas and areas of greatest carrying capacity to invest your time and money in first. Aljoe tells producers to “Learn Quickly and Fail Cheaply.” Temporary fencing enables you do this while adapting to changes in forages and nutritional requirements of livestock and maintaining flexibility. Identify forage gaps in your operation and supplement with perennials or annuals. These can also be used to enhance marginal land or degraded areas. Aljoe also encourages using any available knowledge such as historic utilization of the land, grazing patterns and soil maps to make educated choices concerning grazing. If one location has typically been grazed at a certain time of year it may be beneficial to use that area differently. Utilizing standing or stockpiled forages or crop

aftermath will enable you to move livestock into winter sacrifice areas later helping to maintain pasture health as well.

#### TIPS TO REMEMBER:

1. KNOW CARRYING CAPACITY/ STOCKING RATE
2. HAVE A CONTINGENCY PLAN
3. MAKE USE OF WHAT YOU HAVE
4. MANAGE FORAGE TYPES DIFFERENTLY
5. MANAGE CLASS OF ANIMALS SEPARATELY
6. MINIMIZE # OF HERDS
7. DETERMINE AREA OF GREATEST CAPACITY – Put time and money there first
8. WATER MANAGEMENT - Gives you pasture flexibility
9. LISTEN TO YOUR STOCK – They will tell you when it’s time to move

#### CONCLUSION:

Managing forages and nutrient flow through the system allows for maximum production in plants, the animals grazing them and the soils supporting it all.

Aljoe gives producers practical advice, “Start small, identify those areas of greatest potential that are being undergrazed and put your time and money there first. Make use of what you have. Improvements to water stations and temporary fencing enable you to adapt to changes in forages, stock and weather.” In the sage advice of Aljoe, learning to manage your forages resulting in better livestock performance is best done when you “learn quickly, fail cheaply, maintain flexibility and listen to your livestock.”

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