GETTING A HEAD START ON YOUR GRAZING SEASON

With most of your pasture plants covered under several feet of snow, this hardly seems the time to think about the upcoming grazing season. But, for many experienced graziers mid-winter provides the ideal time to review and evaluate their previous season's management and prepare new strategies for the upcoming season. Was my grazing season long enough? Were my pastures and their forage well utilized? Did I have enough hay for the winter? Are just some of the questions that livestock producers ask annually to help fine-tune their existing pasture management plans.

If the answer to any of the above questions was "NO", then the first step may be to intensify the management of your pasture system. For some livestock producers the initial step may include a shift from a continuous grazing approach to one that involves rotational grazing. A rotational grazing system is one in which animals are sequentially moved from one paddock (i.e., a fenced-section of your pasture) to another, thereby providing fresh forage to livestock as well as permitting recovery time for your pasture plants after grazing. When considering developing a rotational grazing system, one of the first major concerns is, "How many paddocks do I need?" Simply put, two is better than one. For those somewhat skeptical that a modification of their grazing system will increase animal performance and pasture productivity, a common recommendation is to simply divide your existing pasture in half and alternate between grazing and rest periods. Such a system, often referred to as a 'twice-over' rotation, will clearly demonstrate increased pasture utilization and lengthen the duration of the grazing season when compared to a continuous grazing system.

Many beginning 'grass farmers' wanting to readily adopt a more management-intensive pasture system would like a 'recipe' to help determine paddock-size and fencing needs. Although there are many detailed equations available to help calculate such needs, a more experienced grazier will confirm that management-intensive grazing is an art driven by science. The forage species present in your pasture, their yield, and their intake by grazing animals will not be constant and will vary with temperature, soil moisture, soil fertility, ability to regrow after grazing, and season of year. Therefore, 'flexibility' will need to be built into any effective grazing system. Many grazing managers utilize a combination of permanent high tensile electric fencing for the perimeter with temporary fencing for internal subdivisions (i.e., paddocks), which consist of polywire, step-in posts, and a take-up reel. This combination can readily accommodate changes in forage quality or quantity or changes in desired animal performance (e.g., higher gains, more milk production translates to more frequent rotations). The built-in flexibility in such a system permit changing the size of the paddock, changing the length of the grazing period for a paddock, changing the number of animals in a paddock, and ability to add second grazers (i.e., different species of livestock, for example sheep following cattle, or different class of livestock, for example, cow/calf pairs following stockers).

The flexibility that is inherent in such systems enables a grazier to react to what he or she observes in their pastures, but should not be seen as replacement for planning. Pasture managers need to make grazing management plans to facilitate such decisions as pasture

fertility (e.g., when and where should I spread my composted manure), or pasture renovation (e.g., which pastures do I need to incorporate more legumes), or pasture utilization (e.g., which pastures will be hayed, which will be stockpiled, etc.). These decisions should be made prior to the start of the grazing season and should include best and worst case scenarios, to help ease the 'art of grazing' when the 'science of grazing' isn't behaving as anticipated.

For example, in making fertility decisions, the first question may be to consider if it is in fact required. If you currently produce enough forage to meet your grazing and/or hay needs, then additional fertility is probably not economically sound. If forage production from your pastures is less than desired, then fertility or alternatively pasture renovation (i.e., increase legume content of your pastures) may be helpful. Many farmers having predominantly grass-only pastures will initiate their fertility program in the spring. If pastures are harvested for hay, this is a good way to increase hay production. However, under grazing systems, forage is often in abundant supply in spring. Grazing animals may not efficiently use additional growth at this time. This can result in poor return from money invested in a fertility program. It may make more sense in a grazing operation to apply composted manure in mid to late June. This way the additional forage production will occur in mid-summer, when additional forage is needed for grazing.

Similar to fertility management decisions, plans on extending the grazing season are made prior to the actual grazing season, rather than during the grazing season. In my opinion, the most critical period of the year for extending the grazing season is mid-summer. Supplemental pastures during summer can supply forage when forage is normally limiting. Further, the use of supplemental pastures allows grass-legume pastures rest during mid-summer, giving them time to regrow and accumulate (stockpile) forage for late summer or fall grazing. So where do these supplemental pastures come from? Simply put, they come from planning. Grazing managers interested in lengthening their grazing season will look for alternative forage crops to ensure season long forage production.

Alfalfa - Alfalfa can make an excellent complement to grazing systems. Alfalfa is a high quality legume that grows more during mid-summer than cool-season grasses. Alfalfa already exists on many farms, and can support excellent liveweight gains or milk production. Initial spring growth of alfalfa occurs when cool-season pastures are rapidly growing. As such, first cutting alfalfa can be taken as hay. Use alfalfa regrowth for summer grazing. When using alfalfa as pasture, rotational grazing is important. Graze alfalfa similar to haying it, with about 4 weeks rest between grazings. On dairies, where forage intake is critical, moving animals to new forage should be done every milking or at least daily. Bloat can be a concern when grazing alfalfa and should not be ignored. There are many sound management principles that can be used to alleviate the fear of bloat and include; do not move hungry animals to fresh, lush alfalfa; do not move animals first thing in the morning; do not move animals on to wet alfalfa (from dew or rain); and perhaps most importantly observe animals often when first turning them out on alfalfa.

Annuals - Annual grasses such as corn or pearl millet (summer annuals) or annual ryegrass or fall rye (winter annuals), as well as Brassica crops (turnips, kale, rape) can also be added to any grazing program to supplement summer or fall pastures. However, as with grazing alfalfa regrowth, much of the planning for using supplemental pastures must occur in the spring to ensure that seed, fencing, fertility, machinery, and water needs are adequately addressed.

Learning the science of grazing, making grazing plans, etc. should be viewed as exercises to get you excited about the upcoming grazing season, and the last thing they should do is make you feel overwhelmed. I recall reading an article in the Stockman Grass Farmer Magazine by Joel Salatin (February 1998; Why Good Enough Is Perfect. . . Just do it) in which the author stated that so many of his neighbors worried so much about trying to know everything and plan everything before they started that they never started. So with respect to grazing management its important to remember the old adage, “Good judgment comes from experience. . . experience comes from bad judgment”.

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