

ANGUS

BEEF BULLETIN®

"The Commercial Cattleman's Angus Connection"

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Grazing & Hunting:

Unnecessarily at Odds



ILLUSTRATION BY CRAIG SIMMONS

Story by
TROY SMITH

When you rent pasture, there's always a chance you will lose it. Someone else in need of grazing land might offer to pay the landlord a higher rental rate. The property might sell and the new landowner plan to graze his own cattle. Perhaps the landowner intends to use the land for a different purpose — develop it for some commercial, residential or recreational enterprise. Even when a property remains as pasture or rangeland, different purposes may drive competition to control it.

The hunting opportunity a parcel of land affords can create more competition. This writer recently heard about a Kansas cattle producer who lost a longtime lease on a few hundred acres of pasture. The landlord wasn't dissatisfied with the way the renter had been managing the land, but a hunting enthusiast was willing to pay considerably more for the lease —

provided no cattle were allowed to graze on the property.

Many hunters are accustomed to paying fees to rural landowners for exclusive hunting rights. With increasing frequency, however, hunters are leasing or buying the land itself. They want more control over the land they hunt, and some of them think grazing detracts from their primary purpose. Support for that mind-set can be found in opinions posted to certain hunter websites and narratives shared by organizations that oppose grazing on public lands. Typically, they claim grazing by domestic livestock degrades habitat, severely reducing the food, water and space available to wildlife, including game species. If that were true, hunting opportunity should be improved when grazing is prohibited. Right?

Misconceptions

The answer isn't that simple, according to Wayne Hamilton, former director of the Center for Grazing Land

and Ranch Management at Texas A&M University (TAMU). Hamilton says it's wrong to think livestock grazing is always bad for wildlife. He says a total absence of livestock grazing can also be detrimental to habitat and contribute to the decline of local wildlife populations.

"Certainly there have been situations where degradation of habitat occurred as a result of poorly managed grazing. But grazing can have positive effects. It depends on the current and historic timing and intensity of grazing," explains Hamilton, noting how soil conditions, precipitation and existing plant communities also are contributing factors.

Chronic overgrazing is detrimental because it impedes plant growth, reproduction and survival. It causes shifts in plant species composition, with the most favorable native perennial forages typically going into decline, and even disappearing entirely. These include grasses, forbs and shrubs upon which

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Unnecessarily at Odds *(from cover)*

wildlife populations depend for food and cover. Diversity declines as less favorable annuals come to dominate the plant community

However, the absence of grazing can eventually hurt habitat, too. Without the impacts of forage consumption by livestock, plus their hoof action, a thatch of decadent plant growth can build. It's a situation often observed on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres that have been reseeded to native grass and left idle for several years. Decadent material from tall-growing plants shades out low-growing species that are important to wildlife. Thickening thatch hampers moisture penetration into the soil and can even serve as a barrier to movement by young grassland birds.

Optimizing diversity

"The value of well-managed grazing for sculpting and grooming landscapes can't be denied. It can help improve plant diversity," Hamilton adds.

Optimizing the diversity of grasslands to achieve greater economic and ecologic stability is a management objective for Deseret Land and Livestock, which operates on 200,000 deeded acres plus 15,000 acres of public land in northern Utah. Along with roughly 5,000 mother cows, fee hunting and other wildlife-related activities provide ranch revenue. Livestock and wildlife are viewed as codependent, and Deseret employs wildlife biologist Rick Danvir to help manage grasslands for the benefit of both. Danvir says it is all about planning the timing and duration of livestock grazing periods to mimic the feeding patterns of wild herbivores.

Generally speaking, Deseret utilizes high stock density for short periods of time to graze pastures in rotation. Following a grazing period of no more than a month, each pasture is allowed a long period of rest and recovery — usually about 12 months. The season of use for each pasture then varies from year to year. At any given time, 90% of the cattle are grazing 10% of the land. The remainder of the land is resting. Danvir stresses that rest during the growing season is a key element to managing grasslands.

"Managing grazing this way makes livestock eat a greater variety of plants, but periods of rest (during the growing season) promote the vigor and density of perennial plants," Danvir explains. "But too much rest (no livestock grazing at all) is counterproductive, resulting in more thistles in the meadows, greater shrub growth on the range and fewer forbs."

Danvir says Deseret's grazing management has yielded improvement that's often evident in just five years. Particularly noticeable are increases in forbs such as the deep-rooted legumes that provide quality forage for cattle, but also elk, mule deer, pronghorn antelope and sage grouse.

In the Midwest

Greg Judy says deer are sought-after game in Missouri, where there has been an increase in land sales to people primarily interested in hunting. Judy's grass-based operation utilizes about 1,200 acres on 10 different farms. He owns just three of them and leases the remainder, including three properties owned by deer hunters.

Judy employs mob grazing, managing 300 beef cows in a single group, and moving the cattle to a new paddock daily — sometimes even more frequently. Grass is stockpiled for winter grazing, too, which typically reduces the need for feeding supplemental hay to fewer than 10 days per year.

Judy also stresses how periods of rest promote the growth of more and better forage for his cattle, and for wildlife. He admits that some landowners were skeptical at first, thinking grazing could never complement wildlife habitat.

"Grazing gets a bad rap because some people don't really manage it. They just turn out cattle until there's nothing left for them to eat, instead of focusing on improving the land and the kind of forage it produces.



PHOTO BY ART WHITTON

Richard Conner, a TAMU professor of agricultural economics and rangeland ecology management, says a good many traditional landowners who raise cattle could benefit from the adoption of grazing strategies that also optimize wildlife habitat.

With managed grazing, I've been able to show landowners a 30% to 40% increase in legumes, which has attracted more deer. They're taking the trophy kind now, and we've also seen increases in numbers of turkey, bobcats and other wildlife," Judy says.

"Well-managed grazing land can be very profitable. I've doubled our stocking rate over what it was four years ago," he adds. "But we've made the habitat better for wildlife, too. The hunting has improved, and we're giving the hunter-landowner a return on his investment in land."

The same tools

Of course, there are a good many new rural landowners that still think livestock grazing and optimum hunting opportunity cannot coexist. Richard Conner, a TAMU professor of agricultural economics and rangeland ecology management, says most are nontraditional landowners having no ties to agriculture and no interest in livestock. Most are poorly informed. Conner advises them to consider the views of famed conservationist Aldo Leopold, who maintained that wildlife habitat could be destroyed or restored by the same tools: fire, ax, cow, gun and plow. The difference is in how the tools are used.

"The cow is a powerful tool for habitat management. She can be helpful or harmful, depending on how she is applied," says Conner. "Some (hunter-landowners) have come to realize that the landscape can become degraded without grazing. They are learning that it's in their best interest to have neighbors, or someone, run cattle on their land, according to a well-managed grazing system that will improve habitat."

Conner says a good many traditional landowners who raise cattle could benefit from the adoption of grazing strategies that also optimize wildlife habitat. They also might want to consider how fee-hunting could be a complementary ranch enterprise. Conner says there are ample examples already — ranch managers who understand the value of hosting hunting and other recreational pursuits. In some instances, half or more of a ranch's total income is generated by recreation.

"Recreation — and hunting is a big part of that — has become a huge driver of ranchland purchase prices and leases. We've seen land prices so high that only about 15% could be justified by its value for agricultural production. So 85% of the price has to be justified on the basis of something else," Conner states. "To compete, ranchers have to consider additional ways to making the land pay."

Conner's TAMU colleague, Wayne Hamilton, agrees there is need for more education among people who want to own land for hunting and people whose grazing land could provide better hunting opportunity.

"Too often, they are unnecessarily at odds," insists Hamilton. "Grazing can be good for hunting, and hunting can be good for a grazing operation."

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3201 Frederick Ave. • Saint Joseph, MO 64506-2997
phone: 816-383-5200 • fax: 816-233-6575
office hours: (M-F) 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. (Central time)
web site: www.angusbeefbulletin.com

Staff are listed by name, phone extension and e-mail prefix. All direct phone numbers are "816-383-5..."; all e-mail addresses are "...@angusjournal.com"

General manager – Terry Cotton, 214, tcotton

Editorial Department

Editor – Shauna Rose Hermel, 270, shermel;
Assistant editor – Linda Robbins, 245, lrobbins;
Artists – Craig Simmons & Mary Black; **Intern** – Katie Gazda

Field editors

Barb Baylor Anderson, 305 Valley View Dr., Edwardsville, IL 62025, 618-656-0870, anderagcom@sbcglobal.net; **Kindra Gordon**, 11734 Weisman Rd., Whitewood, SD 57793, 605-722-7699, kindras@gordonresources.com; **Becky Mills**, Rt.1, Box 414, Cuthbert, GA 39840, 229-732-6748, beckymills81@yahoo.com; & **Troy Smith**, 44431 Sargent River Rd., Sargent, NE 68874, 308-527-3483; wordsmith@nctc.net

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