



Better Than We Found It

Grazing management plans help producers and the planet.

by Megan Silveira, assistant editor

“You don’t have to be a scientist to walk into a pasture and know it’s being picked at too much,” says Mike Williams.

Though he spent his childhood growing up within city limits, he now has an eye for both cattle and forage. It was his grandparents’ love for beef cattle that first inspired Williams to enter the ranching world, and today the first-generation rancher manages a herd of commercial Angus-based cow-calf pairs in southern California. He, like generations of cattlemen before him, knows there’s more to caring for a herd than just breeding and health decisions — you’ve got to manage your grazing, too.

“Ranchers learned about grazing management back at the turn of the century,” he explains. “Without grass, there’s no ranch. And without managing your grazing, you won’t have grass.”

Assuming a stewardship role over pastureland, however, isn’t like mowing the lawn.

“Grazing management would be the way I manage my livestock and my forage, in a way that I can get the most out of the forage long-term, year after year, as well as take the best advantage of what my livestock has to offer,” Williams says.

By promoting the healthy production of forage on a cattle operation, he says a producer sees countless benefits. The grass will return better with time, soil

health will improve, complexity of species will increase, resiliency of the pasture will strengthen.

“Those goals are in the forefront of my mind, but the potential byproduct of that thinking improves the soil for other factors, too — improved carbon sequestration, biodiversity, habitat,” Williams adds.

To make that a reality, he gives himself an overarching goal: manage his cows so the grass is grazed but still given enough time to recover fully.

Plants, and grasses in particular, Williams says, thrive on the stress of grazing. But take it one step too far, and grasses can’t recover from being overstressed. At his ranch, Williams’ mission is to create an environment where grasses can function to the best of their ability.

He considers it a balancing game, where the scale is always changing.

“There’s nothing about ranching that’s static; there’s nothing about nature that’s static,” Williams says. “Nature can adapt to extremes, and so ranchers have to adapt to that, too.”

Practical choices

While Williams says he can walk through his pasture and make informed decisions about the state of his forage, he has a few tangible practices to help ensure a healthy field.



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Once a year, he soil tests to see the big picture. With the completion of each grazing season, he checks residual dry matter (RDM) and clippings for production estimates.

Beyond being in tune with his property and his forage, Williams finds benefit in writing down his grazing management plan. He says there’s a lot of historical value in tracking what nature did, how he responded and what resulting action came about — for him in repeat scenarios and for future generations that may call the shots.

Robert Wells, livestock consultant at the Noble Research Institute, echoes Williams. Creating a written plan forces cattlemen to sit down and truly consider the pathway the animals will take across the property during the grazing season, he says.

When first diving into the process of writing out a grazing management plan, Wells says producers should pull out a large sheet of paper — a piece of printer paper just isn’t going to cut it.

“The first rule of a grazing plan is to never write it in ink,” he says. “If you live and die by a date on a calendar for a grazing plan, you’ll wind up in a wreck. A grazing plan is meant to be a tool to help manage your operation. It’s got to be flexible and adaptable.”

While there’s always the option of starting from scratch, Wells recommends doing some research online and finding a template. With a template secured (and a

pencil in hand), he says producers can start to take stock of their farm or ranch.

The starting point of all grazing management plans should be a basic inventory, Williams says.

Specifics are vital to a plan’s success, Wells adds.

Know how many head are in the herd, their average weight, how those numbers change throughout a female’s reproduction cycle (in other words, don’t forget to count her growing calf), the total number of pastures and subdivisions that’ll be grazed. Take stock of water resources, and consider limitations in each pasture.

Plans should go deeper than just calculating the carrying capacity of a section of land, Wells says. Producers should think about important dates that could alter management decisions — branding days require cows to be moved close to sorting pens, weaning calves requires two areas of land be available, family vacation extends the amount of time a pasture will have to provide forage, etc.

Keeping all those considerations in mind, Wells says it’s now time to create a visual aid. He suggests making a chart, where each row is a pasture and each column is a period of time, broken down however the producer chooses. Cattlemen should map out where each of their herds will graze throughout the year.


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“You’re going to be using a big eraser,” he jokes. “You’ll be constantly modifying and updating.”

Seasonality, Mother Nature and management decisions are just a few of the factors that could call for the use of that eraser. Though the grazing management plan may need some tweaking throughout the year, Wells says it’ll be a tool that has the potential to refine the eye of a producer.

He suggests hanging the master copy on the main office wall, where everyone involved in the business will view it on a daily basis. A smaller version can go in the feedtruck, for easy reference and quick access to make field notes.

Creating a grazing management plan is a step towards efficiency on the operation, but Wells can’t help but see the bigger picture. What producers do today on their operations has implications for the greater community. It doesn’t take a scientist to know that’s what the beef industry is all about — leaving a positive mark on the planet we call home.

“I have never heard a producer tell me they didn’t care about their pasture,” Wells says. “Grazing management is going to be able to help us do that. It’s going to help us leave it better than we found it.” 

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