



# Grazing 101: Stay Flexible

Employ the right combination of grazing strategies to lower cost, increase forage output.

by Heather Smith Thomas

Every cattle operation is different, yet they have one thing in common — the importance of keeping input costs low. Since feed is the costliest item, and forage is generally less expensive than concentrates, most stockmen try to find the least-cost forage throughout the year. This generally means grazing as many days as possible, with less dependence on harvested feeds.

In some climates, cattle can graze year-round. According to Lorne Klein, retired range management extension specialist for the Ministry of Agriculture at Saskatchewan, even in northern regions, with cold weather and snow, year-round grazing can work — with good planning and a backup plan for when snow is too deep or winter storms make grazing impossible. If pastures become dry or forage too mature,

supplements may be necessary.

“Some producers plant fast-growing annual forages to utilize during part of the grazing year to increase forage quantity and quality,” says Klein. The main thing is to make a plan for each year’s grazing, so cattle have adequate nutrition and so pastures stay healthy and productive. Soil and pasture health must be part of the equation to ensure future forage for cattle.

Each year may be a little different in terms of moisture and growing conditions, so pasture plans must be flexible. Sometimes producers tend to sacrifice a pasture and graze it too closely to have enough forage, but this is counterproductive in the long run, leading



“We rotate between several cool-season pastures, then go to native pastures at a different time each year,” says Steve Fetting. This gives the native plants more chance to grow.

to lower stocking rates in the future.

The ultimate goal should be to improve a pasture with carefully planned grazing, so the stocking rate might increase in future years.



A few additions to the Ranger make dividing pastures for a rotational grazing scheme quick and easy, says Fettig.



A gully on the Fettig Land and Cattle operation showed signs of erosion and poor forage quality in 1990, prior to implementing improved grazing management.



The after photo shows the same gully after using cattle as a tool to heal the land, providing adequate rest and recovery to allow forage to flourish.

## Multiple options

There are many kinds of grazing systems — rotational grazing, mob-grazing, rest-rotation, etc. Some stockmen use a combination of systems, which might include management-intensive grazing (MiG, grazing small paddocks short-term, moving to new ones, coming back to each paddock after it regrows) on irrigated pasture in summer and might use swath-grazing (windrowed forage often strip-grazed with portable electric fencing) in winter.

Often used on rangeland, rest-rotation involves dividing grazing areas into four or more segments and resting one or more segments each year so plants have a chance to go through their entire cycle every few years with no grazing, explains Jim Gerrish of American GrazingLands Services LLC, located near May, Idaho.

Deferred rotation is a variation on that system, and involves grazing each segment at a different time each year, explains

Gerrish. These methods relieve some of the pressure of season-long grazing, resulting in more prolific stands of forage.

Each producer must find the best way to enhance pasture health/growth and sustainability with some form of managed rotational grazing, finding a system that works. Terrain, climate, and rainfall or irrigation capabilities make a difference in what works best.

## More, better forage

Located in south-central North Dakota, Fettig Land and Cattle has implemented several innovative grazing practices to improve stocking rate and foster sustainability.

“When we took over Dad’s operation, we had 180 cows and built our herd to 400 cow-calf pairs over the next 10 years,” says Steve Fettig. But in 1997, calves were only bringing 65¢ per pound, and 1997-98 was a tough winter.

“We ran out of hay, and it didn’t make sense to borrow money for hay, and there wasn’t any hay for sale,” says Fettig. Rather than go into debt, they sold the cows and started custom-grazing 1,000 yearlings. They’ve pastured as many as 1,300 yearlings annually.

To make it work, they intensified their rotational grazing system, Fettig says. Flexibility is the key.

“We pick different pastures to graze at different times of year,” he explains, noting they have both tame and native pastures. They used to grow 900 acres of wheat, barley and oats.

“We converted cropland into hay fields when we increased our cow herd,” he says, explaining they needed it for hay. “Later, rather than try to keep machinery for farming, we turned those hay fields into grazing pastures.”

It was a good way to improve the soil,

*Continued on page 78*

## Annual forages and crop residues

Cattle producers are using many annual forages.

“Some cool-season cereals and many warm-season crops are now being utilized for grazing at different times of the year,” says Lorne Klein, retired range management extension specialist for the Ministry of Agriculture, Weyburn, Saskatchewan.

“Fall rye can be seeded in spring for later-summer grazing or seeded in summer to graze in winter. Italian ryegrass seeded in spring will green up again in the fall if you get rain. The ryegrasses and corn are usually the crops we graze standing,” he says. It’s best to strip-graze corn if

possible, allowing only a few days’ at a time, so cattle have to eat stalks before they leave that strip and can’t go through the whole field eating cobs.

“Some of the cocktail cover crops like sugar beets, collards, turnips, plantain, etc., can be grazed standing. There are many options, but a person might need to check some for nitrates in certain conditions,” he warns.

“Some of the cover crops get so green again in the fall that you must graze them carefully, and strip-graze like you would alfalfa in summer, to avoid overeating. It takes good management to make this work,” he says.



using cattle to add soil nutrients, he says.

The ranch now has 800 acres of tame pastures, providing different places cattle can start grazing in early spring.

“We rotate between several cool-season pastures, then go to native pastures at a different time each year,” he says. This gives the native plants more chance to grow.

“We used to do a twice-over grazing program, but some years it didn’t give plants enough recovery, so now we generally graze each pasture only once each year,” Fettig explains. “We graze some of the cool-season fields twice because they’ll regrow within 40-60 days, but try to graze native pastures only once. On a dry year, there’s benefit in having that forage stockpiled.”

If you know how much forage your pastures produce, this determines the length of grazing season you can have. If you winter-graze, this tells you how much grass to stockpile (not grazing it during the summer) to get through winter, and how many animals you can graze through summer while stockpiling forage to graze through winter.

“You need to not only plan the grazing seasons, but keep grazing days in each pasture short,” says Fettig. “We’ve seen a lot of native legumes come back into our pastures because of the extended recovery time.”

### Meeting land needs

Jay and Krista Reiser, who ranch near Washburn, N.D., found their dream of raising cattle wouldn’t pencil out — even on leased land — until they tried innovative grazing systems.

The ranch they were on had been continuously grazed from the time it was homesteaded in the early 1900s. There were no crossfences, so they used temporary electric fence.

“We use almost all the various types of grazing systems,” says Jay. “We seldom leave cattle in one area longer than a week, or two weeks at most.”

“These longer periods are generally late in the season when grass isn’t growing as much,” explains Krista. “We build our plan

*“Our grazing system is mainly just getting the cows to the right place, at the right time, for the right reasons.”*

**Krista Reiser**

by what the land needs. If a certain piece needs mob-grazing, we work it in. If it needs rested and just winter-grazed, we work that in. Our grazing system is mainly just getting the cows to the right place, at the right time, for the right reasons.”

“When planning how to graze for the year, we try not to box ourselves into a certain scheme, like saying we’re going to move cows once a day or every other day,” Jay explains. “Sometimes we need them in a tight mob with frequent moves, and other times we move every three to five days to do the best job on that particular piece of ground.” **ABB**

Editor’s note: Heather Smith Thomas is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Salmon, Idaho. For additional photos of the Fettigs’ grazing approach, visit <https://www.fettiglandandcattle.com/>.

---

## Stocking rates

How many cattle you can accommodate in rotational systems varies.

“You almost have to be able to vary stocking rate seasonally,” says Jim Gerrish, American Grazing Lands Services LLC of May, Idaho. In a cow-calf operation, this is the greatest challenge for keeping forage supply and animal demand in balance.

“If you can run yearlings part of the season — or keep more heifers for breeding than needed, selling some after they are bred — to reduce the animals on your place later in the year, these are options for adjusting stocking rate to match the grass supply,” says Gerrish. Grass grows prolifically in the spring, then grows slower later in summer.

Stocking rate should be determined by forage demand rather than cow numbers. A lactating cow has much higher demand than a dry cow. Heavy-milking cows need almost twice the energy at peak lactation than when they were dry. In terms of maintenance requirements, going from a dry cow to peak lactation is like doubling cow numbers in terms of forage demand, even before you add in the calf.

“Ranchers who calve in January and February, hitting peak lactation in March and April, have the highest energy demand before they have good grass. Calving later is one way to put more of the demand at the time of year you have the best grass.”

