

Grazing Guidelines



[PHOTO BY GARY WILSON, COURTESY OF USDA NRCS]

Consider these five focus areas to make your farm or ranch more efficient and profitable.

Story by
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“Businesses that are going to be profitable have a business plan and, likewise, grazing operations that want to be successful should have a grazing plan.” That’s the advice of Mark Kennedy, state grassland

conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Missouri.

Kennedy is a proponent of conservation planning and inventorying the resources available on a livestock operation. He calls it the “starting point” that will enable livestock producers to move toward

their goals. Thus, we will begin there in this countdown of grazing guidelines.

Tip No. 1

Develop a grazing plan

Kennedy says developing a grazing plan is a process of

evaluating your available resources — natural resources, animal resources, physical resources and operating resources. This encompasses everything from the soil and plants to the available facilities, labor and finances.

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Kennedy says, “Your farm’s resources are the building blocks of your success.”

As with any type of planning, the process should include the following steps:

- Inventory.
- Determine problems and opportunities.
- Write down goals and objectives.
- Develop strategies to accomplish goals.
- Implement.
- Monitor and evaluate how the plan is working.
- Make adjustments as necessary.

Kennedy notes that the inventory process should be in-depth and include gathering information on soil types, topography and vegetation, as well as type and number of livestock. From this information you should be able to calculate the available animal unit months (AUMs) your land can produce and thus a

carrying capacity. Extension and NRCS personnel are available to help with this inventory process.

Tip No. 2

Create a resource map

Once you’ve documented an inventory of your available resources, most grazing specialists recommend creating a map of your property. This should include existing and planned buildings and sheds, and all pastures with fences, water sources, shelterbelts, etc. Any weed and erosion problem areas should also be noted on the map.

Rod Baumberger, a Sturgis, S.D.-based range consultant and former NRCS grazing specialist, says the map has value because it can help producers assess how much grazing area is available, determine where crossfencing may be beneficial, and help monitor if problem areas are expanding from year to year. Overall, it’s a tool to help make management decisions.

Tip No. 3

Pay attention to plants

Both Baumberger and Kennedy suggest producers learn the plant types that are present in their pastures and monitor any changes in plant species. Kennedy says, “Plants are important because they are indicators of pasture condition and allow landowners to monitor if their pastures are improving or are being negatively impacted.”

Kennedy says indicators of improving pasture condition include the presence of quality or desirable grass species and legumes, establishment of new seedlings, and overall diversity in the plant community.

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Baumberger says landowners need to recognize when overgrazing and declining pasture conditions occur and what it does to their property. He says the major effects are reduced plant production and increased bare ground, which can lead to noxious weed problems, wind and water erosion, soil compaction and reduced soil fertility.

“All total, it likely means less available forage for livestock and may even create nutritional deficiencies for the animals that are grazing,” Baumberger says.

Tip No. 4

Rethink feeding hay

“Whatever place you are at now, if you can cut 30 days off feeding hay, you’ll increase profits,” says University of Missouri Extension specialist Wesley Tucker, who is also a beef producer.

Tucker says the most common question he is asked by producers is how to get better calf prices. He says that’s the wrong focus. “We tend to focus on how can we get paid more, but we can’t influence that as much as feed cost. There we can have a huge impact,” Tucker says.

From his analysis of Standardized Performance Analysis (SPA) data, Tucker reports there are large differences in

profitability between cow-calf operations, with some making up to \$128 per cow per year, while others are losing as much as \$145 per cow per year. Those dollar differences are affected by numerous variables, but Tucker says 52% of that variation in profitability is due to feed cost alone.

Tucker estimates it costs about double to feed hay rather than allowing livestock to graze in the pasture. And feeding grains costs about three times as much as grazing.

Those costs don’t even take into account the nutrients that are removed from the soil when forage is put up as hay.

“When you are haying, you’re removing nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium,” Tucker says. “Every time I feed a 1,000-pound round bale of hay, I’m feeding about \$6 of potassium and phosphorus. Whereas, with grazing,

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livestock are returning some of those nutrients to the soil through manure.”

Thus, Tucker advocates that producers find ways to graze as much as possible. As an example, he suggests stockpiling forages and using them into the fall instead of feeding hay. He estimates grazing stockpiled forage costs 40¢-50¢ per cow

per day, while feeding hay is closer to \$1 per cow per day.

“If you can graze, manure helps leave the nutrients on there,” he concludes.

Taking it one step further, he suggests hay should be fed on the field it was baled on to minimize loss of nutrients and soil fertility.

Tip No. 5**Adapt**

Lastly, with the unpredictable effects of drought, insects, disease, fire and sometimes floods, as well as changing market conditions, grazing specialists agree that the best tool for producers is

the ability to be flexible and to adapt to whatever is thrown their way.

Sandra Wyman, a grazing specialist with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) National Riparian Service Team, says it is human nature to resist change. She says landowners often continue to do things because “that’s the way Grandpa did it.” But, she points out, “Times do change and, just like Grandpa had to, we often need to find a better way to do things.”

Wyman says, “Landowners need the ability to be flexible because we have no control over weather or market conditions. Adaptive management allows you to accommodate variables.”

She defines adaptive management as “the planning and implementation process that helps identify desired resource conditions.” She adds that grazing strategies should be modified when progress toward achieving desired conditions is not being made.

And, that brings us full circle to the first tip — planning.

“Everything boils down to the ability to plan, and then monitor and evaluate,” she concludes. “If objectives are being met, continue the current management. Or if you see a static or downward trend, you may need to adjust your management or objectives. The goal is to sustain the resource, and to do that requires flexibility.”

More advice

Grazing specialists also offer these easy ideas for keeping your livestock operation running smoothly:

- When installing new fence, keep the layout and design as simple as possible and strive for easy access to barns and corrals.
- No matter how many pastures or paddocks you have, number them and hang a sign by the gate so everyone understands which pasture is being referred to when rotating and moving livestock.
- Stay abreast of new information by attending grazing schools. If your operation includes a manager and hired labor, allow all of them the opportunity to participate in the schools/workshops so everyone in the operation understands the grazing principles.
- Don’t forget to ask for help. Both Extension and NRCS offer expertise in grazing management, so seek them out for new ideas and advice.