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Grazing Guidelines

Five elements to focus on to make your farm or ranch more efficient and profitable.

By Kindra Gordan

“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 #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. 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:

1. Inventory
2. Determine problems and opportunities
3. Write down goals and objectives
4. Develop strategies to accomplish goals
5. Implement
6. Monitor and evaluate how the plan is working
7. 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 staff are available to help with this inventory process.

Tip #2: Create a resource map.

Once you’ve documented an inventory of your available resources, most grazing specialists recommend creating a map. This should include existing and planned buildings and *(continued on page 2)*

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sheds, fences, water sources, shelterbelts, etc. Any weed and erosion problem areas should also be noted on the map. Rod Baumberger, a Sturgis, SD-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 cross-fencing 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 #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.

Signs of declining pasture condition are increased percentage of bare ground, increased incidence of annuals or weeds and woody species, and little or no seedling establishment.

Baumberger says landowners need to recognize when overgrazing and declining pasture conditions occur. "All total it likely means less available forage for livestock and may even create nutritional deficiencies for the animals that are grazing," says Baumberger.

Tip #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 a beef producer himself.

Tucker says the most common question he is asked by producers is how to get better calf prices. However, 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 SPA data, Tucker reports there are large differences in profitability between cow-calf operations with some making up to \$128/cow/year while others are losing as much as \$145/cow/year. Those dollar differences are impacted 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 vs. have livestock graze in the pasture. And feeding grains costs about three times as much as grazing.

Not to mention the nutrients that are removed from the soil when forage is put up as hay. Tucker says, "When you are haying you're removing nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Every time I feed a 1,000 lb. round bale of hay I'm feeding about \$6 of potassium and phosphorus. Whereas, with grazing 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 cents/cow/day while feeding hay is closer to \$1/cow/day.

He concludes, "If you can graze, manure helps leave the nutrients on there."

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 #5: Adapt.

Lastly, with the unpredictable impacts to a grazing system 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 adapt to whatever is thrown their way.

Sandra Wyman, a grazing specialist with the Bureau of Land Management's National Riparian Service Team, says it is human nature to resist change. She says often landowners continue to do things because "that's the way grandpa did it." But, she points out that "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." Wyman adds that grazing strategies should be modified when progress towards 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. 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," she concludes.

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.

More Grazing Events

August 7-8 Nebraska Grazing Conference, Kearney, NE for more information visit www.grassland.unl.edu/grazeconf.htm
September 7-8 Fall GLCI Steering Committee Meeting, Casper, WY



New DVD demonstrates low stress cattle handling

A new DVD shows the proper way to handle cattle to reduce stress. The DVD, sponsored by NCBA, focuses on how maintaining low stress levels in herds helps maximize profits.

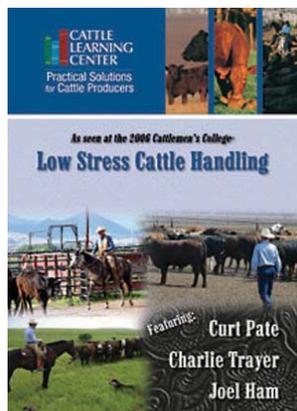
Low Stress Cattle Handling focuses on cattle handling on horseback, with stock dogs and on foot. Three nationally renowned stockmen are featured—Curt Pate, Charlie Trayer and Joel Ham—each of whom provide their own expertise on the importance of maintaining a low stress level in the herd.

“When cattle are in stressful situations their adrenaline levels increase, causing the immune system to slowdown in order to conserve energy,” says Pate, a nationally recognized horseback rancher from Helena, Mont.

Trayer, from Cottonwood Kan., is one of the most respected cowboys in the country based on his knowledge of working cowdogs and on the manner in which he uses them. Trayer stated that knowing a few simple commands and properly training cowdogs not only will keep the dogs and herd calm, but also will save ranchers time.

“Proper handling is just as important on foot in the corral as it is in the pasture,” believes Ham, a fourth-generation on-foot handler from Big Lake, Texas. He notes that maintaining a position where the cattle can see the handler will allow for a less stressful and more productive situation.

The DVD is available for purchase at the Cattle Learning Center Web site at www.cattlelearningcenter.com. The Cattle Learning Center is sponsored by Pfizer Animal Health and promotes the future of the beef industry through research and education projects.



Switchgrass Savvy:

Tips for establishing and growing this warm-season native

Switchgrass has always been well-liked as a forage for livestock grazing and haying. But switchgrass' fame especially skyrocketed after it was mentioned in President Bush's 2006 State of the Union address. Bush referenced that additional research was being funded to evaluate the use of cellulosic materials – such as wood chips, stalks and switchgrass – for the ethanol process.

While experts suggest that the practical use of switchgrass in the ethanol industry is still several years away, the interest in the plant itself has soared.

Dwight Tober, a plant materials specialist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Bismarck, ND, reports that he frequently receives calls from landowners seeking more information about switchgrass. Tober says many producers are interested in establishing switchgrass stands for seed production in anticipation of increasing demand for the forage should its potential as a renewable biofuel resource become reality.

To assist with providing information about switchgrass, Tober and his colleagues at the Bismarck USDA Plant Materials Center have recently compiled a report detailing switchgrass biomass trials in the Dakotas and Minnesota. The 18-page report evaluates the performance of ten different varieties of switchgrass for biomass yield and stand density at six sites in the three-state area based on 6 years of data collection. The report also provides establishment and management recommendations for switchgrass stands.

Switchgrass can be grown from Texas to Canada and from New York to Nevada. But Tober emphasizes that the variety origin is a critical consideration when deciding to plant switchgrass. Specifically, landowners will want a variety that is suitable to their region's climate. Additionally, if the goal is to produce switchgrass for ethanol production, a variety with a higher biomass performance should be selected.

To request the full research report titled “Switchgrass Biomass Trials in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota,” contact an NRCS office in North Dakota, South Dakota or Minnesota; or call the Bismarck Plant Materials Center at (701)250-4330. The publication is also available online at <http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/ndpmc/pubs/SwitchgrassBiomassTrials.pdf>

In determining which switchgrass variety is best suited to your region, Tober suggests working with your local NRCS office. Additionally, Tober emphasizes the importance of working with the highest quality seed available to ensure a reputable stand of switchgrass. He recommends seeding only foundation or certified seed.

Forage posters and resource books available

Hay and forage producers now have access to several new resources for learning more about forage plants. Two new 24 x 30 inch posters, “Forage Legumes” and “Forage Grasses,” are available from the International Plant Nutrition Institute (IPNI). Each poster features color photographs of 30 species of important forage plants. Descriptive text provides details about seeding, establishment, fertility needs, pest considerations and other tips. Many of the species on the posters are grown across large areas of North America. The posters were prepared by the authors of the book, *Southern Forages*: Don Ball, Auburn University; Carl Hoveland, University of Georgia; and Garry Lacefield, University of Kentucky.

The Fourth Edition of *Southern Forages* is available from IPNI as well. Contact IPNI for cost details at: Circulation Department, IPNI, 655 Engineering Drive, Suite 110, Norcross, GA 30092-2837. Phone 770-825-8082, fax 770-448-0439, or email circulation@ipni.net. Visit www.ipni.net for more information.

South Dakota Grassland Coalition honored

The 2007 Excellence in Conservation Award has been presented to the South Dakota Grassland Coalition (SDGLC), a non-profit organization that seeks voluntary improvement of privately owned grassland. The national award is given annually by the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and is the highest award the agency gives to honor those outside the Federal government for their work in conservation.

The South Dakota Grassland Coalition was organized to promote education and offer assistance and information to individuals and groups who are interested in grazing management and are committed to improving South Dakota's grasslands. The Coalition includes well over 100 members and has taken on numerous projects to further accelerate technical assistance, and information and educational programs. They organize and sponsor several tours and workshops such as; livestock handling seminars; ranch tours focusing on grassland and rangeland management practices; the South Dakota Grazing School; and Rangeland Days, a two-day range management event aimed toward junior and senior high school students.

Since its formation, the Coalition's outreach efforts have enabled the NRCS along with other partners to write conservation plans covering more than 1.8 million acres and applied conservation practices on close to a million acres in South Dakota.

In presenting the award, NRCS Chief Arlen Lancaster said, "True conservation of our natural resources can be achieved only when groups and individuals put their commitment to conservation into action. The South Dakota Grassland Coalition takes their knowledge of conservation to communities and individuals across South Dakota regularly and with distinction."

For more about GLCI in your particular state visit www.glci.org and click on "Who's Involved."

Senator Bond presented with GLCI Distinguished Service Award

The Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative presented Sen. Christopher S. "Kit" Bond, R-MO, with its Distinguished Service Award this spring.

National GLCI Chair Bob Drake, who presented the award, said Bond was selected in recognition for his support of agriculture, conservation, and grazing land issues throughout the nation. Bond has demonstrated his support as a member of the Senate Appropriations, Environment, and Public Works committees. The Distinguished Service Award is GLCI's highest award. Only five have been presented since 2003.



To have your GLCI activities or upcoming events highlighted in this newsletter, contact Kindra Gordon at phone 605-722-7699 or kindras@gordonresources.com.

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Dana Tucker
(800) 944-2342

**American Sheep
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Dairy Industry
Howard Straub
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**National Association of
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**National Cattlemen's
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National Farmers Union
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**Society for Range
Management**
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**Soil and Water
Conservation Society**
Craig Cox
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Visit the GLCI homepage at <http://www.glci.org>

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