A voluntary partnership with private landowners

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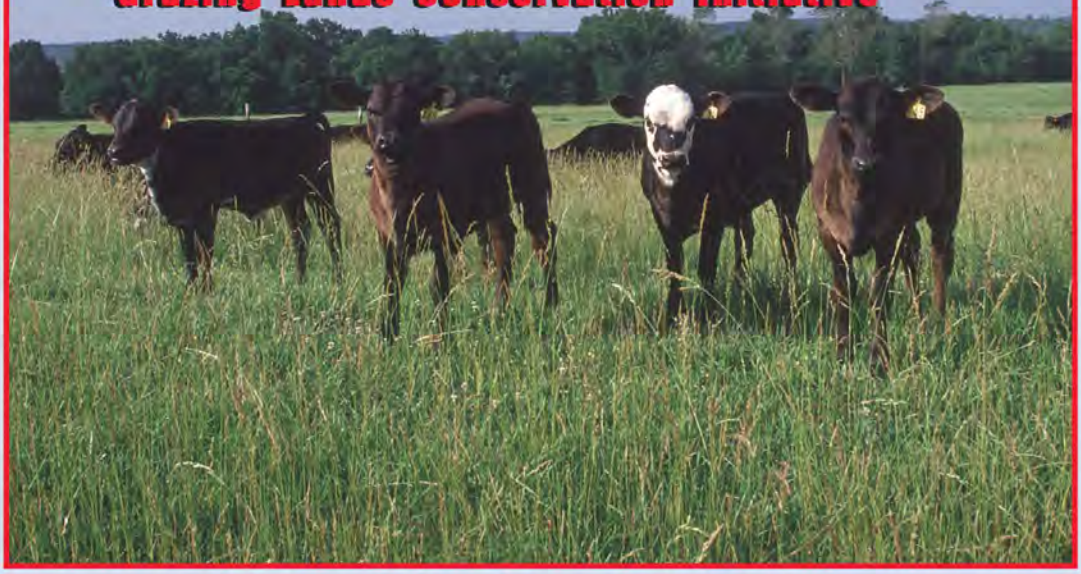
GLCI News

Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative



IN THIS ISSUE

Gear Up For Grazing
Tried and true practices to improve forage utilization on range and pasture lands.

Weeds and Drought
Drought causes a lack of growing grass and gives weeds the "heads up" for getting established in place of grass.

Nebraska Ranch is Winner of National Environmental Award
Michael and Cynthia Kelly demonstrate that partnerships with EQIP and WHIP have paid off well for their livestock and wildlife.

Grazing Events
Call for abstracts for papers to be given at the 2nd Nat'l. Conference on Grazing Lands (2NGCGL)in December. Deadline is April 1.

The Chair's Corner
Chairman Bob Drake tells about the meetings and groups he's attended representing the National GLCI.

Cover Photo
Happy calves in green pastures.
Photo from NRCS photo gallery.

Gear Up For Grazing

With spring green up nearly here, grazing specialists share strategies that will help livestock make the best use of pastures.

by Kindra Gordon, Spearfish, South Dakota

When it comes to eating, livestock can be rather finicky. They often have their favorite forages and loafing spots in a pasture and may leave some areas and plants untouched. That's where grazing management comes in. It requires planning and implementing practices that will achieve a balanced use of forage resource.

Range conservationist Dennis Froemke with the Natural Resources Conservation Service in North Dakota says there's no such thing as "no" grazing management. "Grazing is either done by design when controlled by a knowledgeable manager or by default when animals are allowed to graze at will," he says.

Fortunately for producers there are several relatively simple options to help garner the best use of available forage resources. It just takes some planning, grazing specialists say. Here, they review some of the tried and true practices to improve forage utilization on range and pasture lands:

Have A Plan

Before the start of the grazing season, Froemke advises that producers map out a grazing plan for the entire season. The most important part of that plan is to graze pastures at a different time than they were grazed the year before.

Hugh Aljoe, a range management specialist with the Oklahoma-based Noble Foundation, agrees. He says the most common mistake he sees producers make is "they always start grazing animals in the same place."

"Don't go to the same pasture at the same time every year," Froemke says. He explains that this is critical – especially on native range – to maintain a diversity of plant species.

"Native rangelands have plants that are ready to be grazed at different times during the grazing season. If you return to the same pasture at the same time every year, the same species of plants are always being grazed, while other species that mature later are left untouched. Over time, the plants that are always being grazed will be eliminated from the species mix because they are never given a chance to mature," Froemke says.

(Continued on next page)

Gear Up For Grazing

(Continued from page 1)

Changing season of use on tame pastures isn't as crucial Froemke says because those are typically a monoculture (only one species). But, if the chance is there to alternate which tame pasture cattle start grazing first, do it.

Don't Jump The Gun

Once your grazing plan is in place, be patient. Froemke says a common grazing mistake producers make at spring turnout is putting cattle on pasture before the plants are ready to be grazed.

"Hold off on native range until it's ready to go," he advises. "You'll set your pastures back by going on too early, and you won't get as much forage out of it."

For the Northern Great Plains, Froemke says a good rule of thumb is to start grazing tame pasture around the first of May. Native rangelands are typically ready to be grazed by about the first week of June.

Keep Cattle Moving

But, once the grass is ready, stay on top of it. Aljoe says for producers working with an abundance of introduced species in tame pastures it is critical to utilize plants that are ready early. "I often see that some pastures don't get grazed soon enough," he says.

In the South, Aljoe suggests producers watch for annuals to green up on pastures, and then have cattle graze them down quickly. "Make sure the cool season forages are getting used," he says. If cattle can't keep up, he recommends producers hay that excess forage so warm season grasses like Bermudagrass and the Old World Bluestems can come in for grazing later in the season.

Froemke's advice to northern producers is the same. He advises rotating cattle quickly through native pastures – and then returning for a second grazing after all of pastures have initially been grazed. He suggests cattle spend only about 7 to 10 days in a pasture during that initial grazing period.

Froemke explains that the reason for this twice-over grazing tactic is two-fold. First, it can increase – even double – forage production, he says. When animals graze plants a first time, the plants respond by producing high quality regrowth. So, when animals return to pastures for the second grazing, the quality of the forage is improved, and you're getting additional yields from the grass, he explains.

The second reason for this twice over strategy is that it always maintains some plant cover to collect moisture. "During the initial pass through of pastures, cattle are only lightly grazing the entire area," Froemke says. "Thus, some plant litter and canopy is maintained which helps collect any moisture and maximize infiltration into the soil."

He says on the second grazing pass forages can be grazed a little heavier, but be careful. "You never want to push any pasture too hard. If you remove too much vegetation you'll lose the plant cover that catches water," he says.

Aljoe issues the same caution. "Always remember to keep residual plant cover at no less than 3 inches of stubble to conserve water and protect the soil from erosion," he says.

Guidelines for efficient and economical weed control.

WEEDS& drought

Livestock producers across much of the U.S. have suffered through drought conditions the last few years – which can lead to a new problem: weeds.

Drought and the resulting lack of grass growth, can quickly put producers in a situation where forage is in short supply – making pastures susceptible to overgrazing and giving weeds a shot at getting established. Weeds are more likely to infest heavily grazed pastures because of the reduced competition from grasses and the resulting bare ground and open space that allows sunlight and precipitation to reach the weed seeds in the soil.

A similar weed scenario can result on pastures burned by wildfire or if a controlled burn is conducted at the wrong time of year, says Gary Kilgore, an agronomy specialist with Kansas State University's Southeast Area Extension Office in Chanute, KS.

Typically, weeds that appear the year after heavy grazing or a drought will be annuals. But, if an area is heavily grazed year after year, they can become perennial weed infestations and a growing problem, says Jerry Volesky, an Extension range and forage specialist at the University of Nebraska's West Central Research and Extension Center in North Platte, NE.

To minimize the risk of weed infestations and allow pastures to recover from drought, Volesky suggests running lighter stocking rates or defer grazing for as long as possible on pastures that were heavily grazed the previous year. Both of these strategies can help grass plants recover and replenish their root systems.

If weeds do become a problem, Volesky says to first analyze the problem. Are they annuals? Perennials? Are they palatable?

"You can flash graze cool season annual weeds in the spring and continue good grazing management on those pastures," says Volesky. But in some cases weeds can be so extensive that herbicide treatments may be needed, he adds.

When To Spray?

Weed specialists say the best time to spray most weeds and brush is from mid-May to early June, when plants are actively growing. So, if it's a drought year and nothing's greening up, should you spray?

"If it's hot and dry and things have shut down, the weeds and brush aren't going to translocate herbicides to their roots for an effective kill," says Kilgore.

But he adds, "Weeds will revive with moisture. So, if you get 1-2 inches of rain, waiting a few days and then applying an herbicide can be effective." However, this rule does not hold true for brush control. "Brush really should be actively growing when herbicides are applied. If it's too dry in the spring, I'd recommend waiting to see if there's more moisture the next year," Kilgore says.

Nebraska Ranch Recognized For Stewardship Efforts

Michael and Cynthia Kelly, owners of Kelly Ranch on the southern edge of the Nebraska Sandhills, are this year's winners of the National Environmental Stewardship Award. The award was presented in January at the 2003 Cattle Industry Convention in Nashville, Tenn.

The family-owned and managed, integrated cow/calf and stocker operation has been in the family since 1885. The combined ranches include both owned and leased land, comprising approximately 20,000 acres of native Sandhill grass, 500 acres of native meadow hay, 350 acres of irrigated alfalfa and 130 acres of irrigated corn.

"The Kellys have demonstrated how producers can run a successful cattle operation while managing resources and implementing environmentally sound practices," said NCBA President and Iowa cattleman Wythe Willey.

All livestock on the Kelly ranch are on a planned rotational grazing system allowing the range some rest during the growing season. As a result, the Kellys have realized not only an increase in available forages for livestock, but witnessed an increase in wildlife on the ranch as well.

Michael and Cynthia Kelly, Nebraska. Winners of NCBA's National Environmental Stewardship Award for 2003.

Ranch enhancements by the Kellys include seven miles of cross fencing, 11 livestock water wells, 7,818 feet of livestock water pipeline, 12 new windmills and 19 new livestock water tanks. In addition, they have planted 11,178 trees for livestock and wildlife windbreaks. Several of these improvements have been funded through cost-sharing programs with both Environmental Quality Incentive Program and Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program funding.

"I should note that partnerships have helped me financially to do things I couldn't afford to do myself," said Mike Kelly. "These are things that I wanted to do – improving our ranches by enhancing forage production and utilization, restoring the condition of the riparian areas along the North Platte and Birdwood Creek, enhancing wildlife habitat and protecting the water quality of our aquatic systems. I am glad we can make a difference."

The Kellys have worked with numerous groups to achieve their production and environmental goals for their ranch, including: The Nature Conservancy of Nebraska, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Sandhills Task Force, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and Central Nebraska Public Power and Irrigation District.

This marks the twelfth year the Environmental Stewardship Award Program has been sponsored by Dow AgroSciences. The program recognizes cattle producers whose stewardship practices are inventive, cost-effective and contribute to environmental conservation.

The regional and national recipients of this top U.S. beef industry award are selected by a committee of representatives from university faculty, federal and state government agencies, and conservation and environmental organizations. The Kelly Ranch was nominated for the award by the Nature Conservancy.

GRAZING EVENTS

PREPARATIONS BEING MADE FOR 2NCGL

Planning is well under way for the Second National Conference on Grazing Lands (2NCGL) to be held Dec. 7-10 in Nashville, TN. The conference is being designed around the theme "Harmonize with America's Grazing Lands," with the objective of increasing awareness of the economic and environmental benefits of grazing lands among livestock producers and land owners.

The 2NCGL is being hosted by the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI) and several other sponsoring organizations.

Presentations will center on 1) The building of partnerships between agricultural, grazing and urban communities; 2) Successful "cutting edge" management technologies for grazing practices; 3) Economic and public policy implications of grazing; and 4) the optimizing of grazing land health for environmental and social benefits.

If you are interested in giving an oral or poster presentation at the conference, an abstract must be submitted by April 1, 2003. Trade show exhibitors and conference sponsors are also being sought. For more information contact John W. Peterson, 2NCGL Program & Conference Manager, 9304 Lundy Court, Burke, VA 22015-3431. John's telephone number is 703-455-6886 or 4387, fax 703-455-6888, e-mail jwpeterson@erols.com.

Notification of accepted abstracts will start in May 2003. Presenters are responsible for providing their own conference travel, registration and other expenses.

For more information about the 2NCGL visit www.glci.org.

THE CHAIR'S CORNER

Greetings from Oklahoma. I have been busy these past few months attending our GLCI Partners' meetings. I have met with delegates, committees and Boards of Directors at the following meetings: American Farm Bureau in Tampa Bay, Florida; National Cattlemen's Beef Association in Nashville, Tennessee; Society for Range Management in Casper, Wyoming; and National Association of Conservation Districts in Orlando, Florida.

In Casper I had the opportunity to meet with producers from North Dakota, Montana and Nebraska who are interested in organizing a regional mentoring program in the Northern Plains. This is an example of locally led grassland coalition groups getting together to promote grassland management.

These are challenging times in funding for conservation and grassland management programs. We have to keep in mind that the original goal of GLCI is to secure and provide additional voluntary technical assistance on our nation's private grazing lands.

Those interested in presenting grazing information at the 2nd National Grazing Conference in Nashville, Tenn. Dec 7-10, don't forget to get your abstracts submitted to John Peterson at jwpeterson@erols.com.

2002 Top 10 States Based On Beef Cows

State	Head	% of US Total
1. Texas	5,440,000	16.44%
2. Missouri	2,060,000	6.22%
3. Oklahoma	1,933,000	5.84%
4. Nebraska	1,932,000	5.84%
5. South Dakota	1,792,000	5.41%
6. Kansas	1,485,000	4.49%
7. Montana	1,451,000	4.38%
8. Kentucky	1,075,000	3.25%
9. Tennessee	1,060,000	3.05%
10. North Dakota	1,008,000	3.20%
Top Ten	19,236,000	58.11%

Source: CattleFax

Bob Drake, Chairman
National GLCI Steering Committee

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Visit the GLCI homepage at http://www.glci.org

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