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A voluntary partnership with private landowners

GLCI News

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Courtesy of the NRCS-USDA Photo Gallery.

Riparian Review

With management, you can graze these special areas.

By Kindra Gordon

Riparian areas, those highly productive and often lush green zones along creeks and streams, have been and continue to be a contentious issue among landowners, federal land permittees, land management agencies, and the public.

As interest grows in multiple uses on lands and more issues arise with threatened and endangered species, grazing livestock on riparian areas continues to draw debate, reports Sandra Wyman, a rangeland management specialist with the National Riparian Service Team, a group based in Prineville, OR, and comprised of Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service specialists in partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. She adds, "There's often a perception that grazing livestock in riparian areas is bad, and no livestock in these areas is good."

But Wyman says that perception is far from accurate. "In many situations, removing livestock from riparian areas is not necessary," she says, and instead suggests the implementation of proper management strategies to develop a balance between utilizing the forage in these zones, while also allowing time for riparian areas to rest and recover.

What Works?

So what works and what doesn't when grazing these delicate areas? Foremost is active participation by the land manager. "You can't just turn your cattle out in the spring and round them up in the fall," says Wyman. "You need to monitor animal performance, the forage resource, and the physical condition of the riparian area and be prepared to adjust grazing use."

During the 1990s, Bob Ehrhart, currently a Natural Resources Program leader with Oregon State University, studied healthy riparian zones on 34 ranches in Montana to determine what had been done to get, or keep, these areas in healthy condition. From his research he found seasons of use and lengths of grazing periods varied greatly, but the commonality was that all of the producers were actively involved in the management of their property and were concerned about the land. Bottomline, "Management, not a particular grazing system, is the key to keeping riparian areas healthy," Ehrhart concluded.

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Wyman adds that management can also offer economic benefits to the producer. Livestock staying on riparian areas grazed down to nothing and waiting for plants to regrow aren't going to be gaining and performing, she points out, and says management can help livestock use forages more efficiently in the pasture.

So, when it comes to season of use and length of time to graze riparian areas, Wyman and Ehrhart say it must be tailored to each situation. "You can't cookie-cut this. It depends on the soils, hydrology of the area, and the goals of the ranch operation and public land if applicable," says Wyman. For instance, she says the dormant season (i.e. winter) is when plants are generally least vulnerable, but if that doesn't fit the operation's grazing needs because they get too much snow, it's not the right solution.

"Any season can work, and any season can not work," she says, depending on resource conditions and how the resource is managed. Wyman adds, "That is why we recommend monitoring and having producers set goals for triggers such as stubble height on key forage species." Then, based on that information, land managers need to evaluate forage use, riparian area condition, and, if necessary, make adjustments.

For example, if livestock graze a riparian area in the hot season, once plants have been grazed to the stubble height you've set as a limit or if acceptable stream bank alteration levels are met, Wyman says it is time to move the animals. "The key is you want to graze a plant once and then allow about 20-30 days rest. Without rest, a plant can't photosynthesize and maintain root vigor," she explains.

Common Management Mistakes

Wyman says a frequent mistake she sees in managing riparian areas is moving the herd to a new pasture, but leaving a few animals behind. "When riparian areas aren't completely rested, even as few as 6 to 10 head can keep the area in poor condition if they are left there season long to graze," she says.

Another mistake is failing to monitor. "Monitoring within season is important – in order to evaluate if the plant resources are going in the direction you want over the long term. She suggests setting reasonable goals and tracking things like species, climate and precipitation. In addition, she recommends long term trend monitoring of riparian herbaceous plants and woody species regeneration along the water, as well as key areas in the uplands. A healthy riparian area with a diverse mix of wetland plants will be able to better hold water in the soil versus letting it all runoff into the stream.

Lastly, she suggests incorporating riparian area use into total ranch management plans, so the areas can be specifically managed, while still being a valuable and healthy grazing resource. She also says to be adaptable; "If you try a technique that doesn't work, evaluate why change did not happen. Perhaps it was due to a flood event or drought. So try something else and don't give up."

Solving Riparian Issues

The National Riparian Service Team (NRST) is devoted to assisting both public and private groups in developing a collaborative approach to riparian management.

The team's strategy involves bringing all interested parties together in a community (landowners, permittees, agencies, and the public) to encourage communication, build trust and create a common vision for the resource, according to Sandra Wyman, a Rangeland Management Specialist on the NRST.

The team has primarily provided assistance in the West when conflicts arose involving private and public lands and provided training and collaboration building. They've also worked with private landowners and groups with watershed issues across North America.

Wyman reports that communication is often the key to developing relationships among groups who initially seem to have differing viewpoints. "When you get all interested parties together on the land, look at how the riparian area is supposed to function first and then share what each group's concerns are in a respectful manner. Through this process people do become more informed and are often able to come up with a shared vision and work together to develop potential solutions," she says.

For more about the services provided by the NRST visit http://www.or.blm.gov/nrst/index.htm.

Grazing Distribution Tips

One of the biggest headaches for producers is often the challenge of getting cattle to graze pastures uniformly. Whether it's tame pasture or native range, many areas – like the lush riparian zones – are over utilized, while uplands are barely grazed.

Fencing pastures into smaller units for better utilization is an option. But, it can be costly. Fortunately, there are other viable management practices that attract animals to seldom-grazed areas to consider.

Water developments have long been recognized for enticing livestock to travel to new grazing locations.

For example, if you have five water tanks spread across a section and turn water off at all but one of them, cattle will concentrate in the area where the water is. When the forage has been utilized in that area, turn off the water and move the animals to a second location where a new tank is turned on. (If using dug-outs, fence them out, close the gate and move cattle to the next location with water.)

This strategy works best in areas of rugged terrain where steep slopes create some natural barriers from one watering zone to the next. As a rule, place water every 0.5 of a mile in rugged terrain and every 1-mile in rolling hills.

Montana's Derek Bailey says another common mistake he sees producers make is to move cattle into a new pasture and enter near a stream so that cattle know where the water is. Instead, introduce cattle to a new pasture at an off-stream watering site or tank, so the cattle aren't apt to continually return to the stream.

Bailey, an assistant professor with Montana State University based at the Northern Ag Research Center in Havre, has done several research projects looking at the use of supplements.

He has found **strategically placed molasses blocks** can be even more effective than

GLCI SPOTLIGHT ON

National Farmers Union

Founded in 1902, the National Farmers Union (NFU) has a membership of nearly 250,000 farm and ranch families across the U.S. The group strives to sustain and strengthen family farm and ranch agriculture through its grassroots structure at local, state, and national levels. As its mission, NFU believes that "strong farm and ranch families are the basis for thriving rural communities…which, in turn, are vital to the health and economic well-being of the entire U.S. economy."

The NFU became a GLCI supporter and partner organization in 1998 through the efforts of NFU members Eunice Biel, who operates a dairy with her family near Harmony, MN, and Gerald Jaeger a dairyman from Campbell Sport, WI.

Eunice Biel

Biel, whose parents were active in NFU, has been member of the organization since she was a child, and says, "I was raised to be aware of the issues around me. National Farmers Union is really the only organization that speaks for independently family-owned farms, because only farmer members can set policy."

So, when Biel attended a grazing conference several years ago in Wisconsin and learned about GLCI and its mission to provide technical grazing assistance to private landowners, she felt it was an effort NFU should be involved with. From that spark, she and Jaeger drafted proposals to support GLCI and presented them at their state NFU conventions in Minnesota and Wisconsin, respectively. "The policy passed at both of our state conventions and went on to pass at the National Farmers Union convention," reports Biel; and she and Jaeger have represented NFU on the National GLCI Steering Committee ever since.

Jaeger initially served as an alternate on the National GLCI Steering Committee when NFU became a partner organization, while Biel served as the representative. But, about two years ago, they switched responsibilities and Jaeger now is the representative and Biel, who also works off the farm as a graphic designer at the Mayo Clinic, serves as an NFU alternate on the committee.

Bringing Midwestern Views To GLCI

Grazing has been important to both Biel and Jaeger in their family farm operations and, through their involvement in GLCI, they hope to create awareness of the benefits grazing can provide to other landowners.

Jaegar says that by serving on the National GLCI committee he has hoped to represent Midwestern views, and especially bring more emphasis to the opportunities and economic viability dairy grazing can offer.

Gerald Jaeger

As a director for the past 15 years with the Wisconsin Farmers Union, Jaegar has long been active in rallying support for families involved in agriculture. He and his wife Barbara raised five children on their family dairy farm in Wisconsin and, for the past five years, have specialized in being custom heifer raisers for a large dairy operation. They custom raise about 400 heifers annually and utilize grazing as part of that system.

Biel adds, "Grazing offers so many options for family farmers to improve livestock production and their bottom line. With the technical assistance, producers can enhance their own sustainability."

She reports that on the dairy farm that she and her husband Robert own and operate with their son Kevin, his wife Kelly, and their three young daughters, they have expanded their operation to include more grazing. The operation includes 150 milk cows, as well as the replacement females they raise for the herd and the steers they feed to finishing. "We were initially doing some grazing with our heifers and dry cows and have now seeded more areas to grass and rotationally graze some of the cows in their last trimester of lactation. In the next year we plan to use more of the herd in rotational grazing," she says.

The Biels' operation, which includes land homesteaded by Eunice's great-great grandfather, consists of 860 acres of corn, soybeans, hay and oats to raise all the feed for the dairy.

Looking To The Future

Asked why NFU believes in GLCI efforts, Jaegar says, "Our organization's mission is similar to GLCI in working with landowners to achieve sustainable production agriculture. It requires a national effort to gain the support of lobbyists and legislators to get money appropriated for technical assistance on grazing lands and, as a voice for family farmers, we think it is important for NFU to be a part of that."

"NFU has always been a supporter of conservation-minded programs," adds Biel. She says she is excited to see the Grasslands Reserve Program being created and hopes that more opportunities like that will be expanded for private landowners in the future.

In her home state of Minnesota, Biel credits NRCS state conservationist, Bill Hunt, as a huge supporter of GLCI and grazing efforts in the state. She reports that they hope to see grazing continue to garner attention from livestock producers, and their next effort is to implement educational programs across the state to create awareness about reducing somatic cell counts on dairies through grazing programs.

On a national level she says, "The challenge is to continue to get other states involved in GLCI and create more awareness about the opportunities grazing affords. My message to other landowners is you don't have to be all grazing or none. You can do as much as feel comfortable with. Implementing some form of grazing system – even on a limited basis – will still make you money. It's a win-win situation."

Jaegar believes GLCI has made a difference to private landowners. "We've been able to provide technical assistance for grazing and educational programs to landowners in several states. GLCI appears to be getting well-established and has made some strides forward. I'm looking forward to working with NFU and the National GLCI Steering Committee to accomplish more in the years ahead.

For more information on NFU contact their Denver headquarter office at 800-347-1961or visit www.nfu.org.

salt at getting cattle to utilize seldom used areas such as rugged terrain.

"The molasses tubs appear to be a more powerful tool than salt, especially in late summer and fall and winter," Bailey says. He credits that to the fact that the molasses is high in protein and more palatable. "It's a better nutritional reward than salt."

His research indicates the cows will lick the supplement and then graze about 600 yards from the area. "We've been able to gain 10-15% utilization in more rugged areas," Bailey reports, and says the extra forage being utilized pays for the cost of the supplement.

If you plan to use salt or molasses blocks/tubs (or the two together), Bailey suggests first putting the supplement near water to introduce cattle to it. After a few days, move it out a quarter to half mile from water. As animals utilize the forage around the supplement, continue to move the blocks up slope and further out. *- by Kindra Gordon*

THE CHAIR'S CORNER

Bob Drake

This winter GLCI has been represented at several industry trade shows and annual meetings. I attended the American Farm Bureau Federation convention in Honolulu in early January and the Society for Range Management annual meeting in Salt Lake City and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association convention in Phoenix the latter part of January. It is always insightful to meet with our industry partners and producers and hear about grazing issues and programs out on the land.

NRCS hosted 10 listening sessions for the Conservation Security Program across the nation in January and February with several organizations from the industry attending and providing feedback to the agency.

The President's proposed budget for 2005 includes $21.5 million for GLCI. This is the same amount designated as last year, which shows continued support for GLCI programs by the administration.

The National GLCI Steering Committee will hold their annual spring meeting March 22 in Washington, DC. This annual event is an important opportunity to take the GLCI message to our country's leadership and political decision-makers to continue to garner their awareness and support for important grazing issues.

Bob Drake, Chairman
National GLCI Steering Committee

Sterling Stewards

Hats off to Elaine and George Work, of Work Family Ranch, San Miguel, CA, who were named national winners of the 2004 Environmental Stewardship Award Program (ESAP) during the NCBA Convention and Trade Show in Phoenix, Arizona.

Sponsored by Dow AgroSciences, the award program recognizes producers whose stewardship practices are inventive, cost-effective and contribute to environmental conservation.

The Work Family Ranch is a combination cow-calf and stocker operation on its way to being operated by the fifth generation. The ranch features guided hunts, a Farmstay program, public trail rides, and a girls' horse camp.

Other regional winners recognized by NCBA's annual environmental stewardship program included Carlton 2x4 Ranch, Arcadia, FL; M&M Cattle Co., Carthage, MO; Canyon View Farms, Geary, OK; Frasier Farms, Limon, CO; and Barenthsen Red Angus Ranch, Powers Lake, ND.

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

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