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A voluntary partnership with private landowners

GLCI News

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Cover Photo Courtesy of NRCS

Pasture Pointers for Horse Owners

Tips to help small acreage landowners prevent overgrazing.

By Kindra Gordon

As the trend toward small ranchettes has grown, so too has the number of people with a few horses on their acreages. Today, there are about 6.9 million horses in the U.S., which makes a $12.1 billion economic impact to the U.S. economy.

But with this trend toward more horses, there's an increasing need to help small acreage landowners understand conservation and grazing management.

Often times small acreages are overgrazed because landowners have too many horses and not enough land, points out Rod Baumberger, a Sturgis, SD-based range consultant and former Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) grazing specialist. Baumberger also owns a small acreage and has horses himself. He shared his experiences in managing horses on small properties at the Third National Conference on Grazing Lands in St. Louis in December 2006.

Foremost, Baumberger says is that landowners need to recognize what overgrazing does to their property. The major impacts are reduced plant production and increased bare ground. This 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, says Baumberger.

Baumberger says there are three questions horse owners should ask themselves to determine if their land is being overused. They are:

1) Is the productivity of your grass starting to decline?
2) Do you notice an increase in the amount of bare ground and/or weeds?
3) Are you buying excessive amounts of feed to supplement horses year-round?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, you likely need to evaluate the number of horses your land can support.

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Have A Plan

Baumberger says the first step toward preventing overgrazing is to develop a conservation plan for your property. This process includes gathering information about your available resources and the horse's requirements so you can make management decisions. The steps to conservation planning include:

1) **Make a map of your property**. This should include existing and planned buildings and sheds, fences, water sources, shelterbelts, etc. Any weed and erosion problem areas should also be noted on the map. Baumberger says creating a map can help 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.

2) **Inventory the resources on your property**. This includes gathering information on soil types, topography, and vegetation. From this information you should be able to calculate the available Animal Unit Months (AUMs) your land can produce and thus a carrying capacity of the number of horses you can graze. Extension and NRCS staff are available to help with this inventory process.

3) **Understand the horse's requirements**. These include exercise, shelter for inclement weather, fresh water (8-12 gallons/day) and feed – about 30 pounds of grass or hay per day. Or, for grazing purposes one average horse equals 1.3 to 2.4 AUMs (depending on the size of the animal). Also note that horses are continuous grazers. Thus, if grass is in front of them, they will eat.

With these three steps to put together a conservation plan, Baumberger says landowners can then evaluate grazing options for their horse(s). Basic strategies include:

- Rotational grazing, where existing pastures are cross-fenced into smaller paddocks to rotate horses through; or
- Limit grazing, where horses are let out to graze for short periods one or two times daily.

Additionally, you may consider developing exercise paddocks, which are areas for exercise only. Or, if a stream runs through your property, fence those areas off so grazing can be controlled.

In devising the grazing system that fits your situation, Baumberger says it is important to keep in mind that timing and rest are the two critical components. Baumberger says grazing systems can work to prevent overgrazing and in some instances increase grazing capacity.

He speaks from his own personal experience as he created 13 paddocks using electric fence and polywire on his 22 acre property to rotationally graze 4 horses. The horses were moved daily or every couple days to allow about 20 days rest for each paddock. Baumberger brought his horses into the corral each night, so they weren't eating grass continually. Overall, he was able to increase grazing capacity on his property by about 30%.

Landowners can rotationally graze on any size scale, he says and notes that two, three or four pastures are better than one pasture that is continuously grazed season long. Again he says, "The most important components for protecting the grass are time and rest."

Baumberger concludes by encouraging horse owners to seek technical grazing assistance from Extension or NRCS staff to determine how much forage is available on their land.

He adds, "Ask yourself what you want your land to look like now and in the future. And then you may need to ask yourself the hard question of "How many horses your land can support?"

Most importantly he says to protect natural resources and prevent overgrazing, landowners need to be aware that the size of their acreage may limit the number of horses they can keep.

*For more detailed information, go online to view a publication from the Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension about Managing Horse Grazing at http://pods.dasnr.okstate.edu/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-2084/F-3981web.*pdf

Targeted Grazing Handbook Available

The application of livestock grazing to suppress unwanted plants has been around for centuries. Today, targeted grazing by livestock is being rediscovered and honed as an ecologically friendly and effective tool to address management challenges, like controlling invasive exotic weeds, reducing fire risk in the wildland-urban interface, and finding chemical-free ways to control weeds in organic agriculture.

A new handbook is now available that outlines the basics of applying targeted grazing for vegetation management. It includes 18 chapters and represents a compilation of the latest research on harnessing livestock to graze targeted vegetation in ways that improve the function and appearance of variety of landscapes.

Created through funding from the National Sheep Industry Association and the American Sheep Industry Association (ASI), the handbook is available on-line at: http://www.cnr.uidaho.edu/rx-grazing/Handbook.htm. Printed copies are available through ASI (info@sheepusa.org) for $25.

Wyoming Ranch Recognized

Thaler Land & Livestock Company of LaGrange, WY, is the 2006 Environmental Stewardship Award Program (ESAP) National Winner. The award was presented during the 2007 Cattle Industry Convention in early February. Sponsored by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), Dow AgroSciences and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, the annual ESAP awards honor cattle producers whose stewardship practices are inventive, cost-effective and contribute to environmental conservation.

The Thaler family was nominated by the Wyoming Stock Growers Association.

"Over the years, the Thaler family has been an ambassador of stewardship, reaching out to educate schoolchildren, community groups, government employees, fellow producers, anyone that will listen," noted the ESAP Selection Committee. "They have an open-door ranch, where spreading the message about stewardship is a number one priority."

Their southeastern Wyoming ranch stands at an elevation of 4,800 feet despite a chronic lack of rainfall, the family has spent 40 years working to wisely use every drop of irrigation water on the ranch. Their exemplary practices include an intensive grazing system under center-pivot sprinklers.

"The Thalers define teamwork, creating alliances and working with more than a dozen different government agencies, community groups and organizations on major conservation efforts," explains Dave Petty, Chairman of the ESAP Selection Committee.

Homesteaded in 1916, Thaler Land & Livestock has been active in area conservation efforts since its founder, Joe Matje, worked to establish the South Goshen Conservation District nearly a century ago. Today, the third and fourth generations are represented by Dennis and Sandra Thaler, along with daughter and son-in-law Brandy and Kevin Evans, who together operate the 1,500 head commercial cattle ranch.

Thaler Ranch uses gated pipe irrigation, low pressure center pivot sprinklers, and flood irrigation practices to irrigate orchard grass, regar brome and alfalfa. This allows them to let the native pastures go unused until September 15th. This practice reduces over grazing and provides more feed for their cattle herd during the winter months.

Another stand-out achievement is their management of noxious weeds, including leafy spurge on one of their meadows. They tried several techniques including spraying, leveling 30 acres to irrigate, plowing, fertilizing, and after working for two years they eliminated the spurge. The family worked in cooperation with local, state and federal agencies to achieve this stewardship goal.

The Thalers own a feedlot and backgrounding operation and have also managed environmental challenges that come with owning both. With the cooperation of the Natural Resource Conservation Service they have designed a feedlot ensuring all runoff is contained by a dike, and eventually used to fertilize a nearby meadow. A windbreak was planted to provide shelter for the cattle and serve as a buffer against soil leaching. They have an integrated nutrient management plan that outlines uses for animal waste byproducts.

"The Thaler family makes progressive annual adjustments that have a long-lasting impact on the ranch's sustainability," says Petty. "That's what this award is all about. Consistently improving upon the improvements you have made in years past to better conserve our landscapes."

The prestigious Environmental Stewardship Award Program is now in its 16th year. Any organization, group, or individual can submit a nomination on behalf of a U.S. cattle producer. For more information, go to www.beefusa.org/esap or contact NCBA's Washington office at 202-347-0228.

Educational kit helps address misconceptions about ag

A new teaching tool produced by the American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture addresses common misconceptions about agriculture using sound, science-based information.

"People who do not understand how food is produced and the challenges associated with its production are often easily misled," says Betty Wolanyk, director of education and research for the Foundation. She notes that many misconceptions about agriculture and the environment can be found in textbooks and on the Internet. Others are perpetuated through advertising that inaccurately portrays America's farmers and ranchers.

To combat those misconceptions, AFBF's instruction kit is designed to be user-friendly. It includes information on 35 issue topics ranging from DDT to global food issues and nutrition to organic food production.

The kit was originally designed for classroom use at the high school and college levels. According to Wolanyk, demand for the presentation led the Foundation to create a shorter version that can be presented in 45 minutes to an hour or adapted for an even shorter presentation. Both versions are included in the kit on a CD-ROM along with an 11-page lesson plan, background information on each issue and three sets of student cards.

"Addressing Misconceptions About Agriculture" instructors' kits may be ordered online at http://www.ageducate.org.

Grassland Curriculum Developed for Classrooms

Information for teaching grassland principles in the classroom not only has to be good to be accepted by teachers. It must also meet the National Science Education Standards. This is according to research done by educators as to why science teachers select a curriculum. Almost 75% said the deciding factor was whether or not the curriculum met the National Science Education Standards.

So, if you've been frustrated by not getting your well thought out, well presented grassland information into science classrooms, you'll be pleased to know there is now a curriculum prepared by education professionals for rangeland that meets the National Standards

In 2005, a group of individuals, representing Cooperative Extension, the Nature Conservancy, 4-H, K-12 schools, universities, and others, was convened by Montana State University Extension to write such a curriculum. They hired a curriculum writer and the end product was a publication called "At Home on the Range". Targeted toward 4-H youth, this effort is the first national curriculum for rangeland that meets the National Science Education Standards.

To obtain information about this curriculum contact,

Kirk Astroth, Director
Montana 4-H Center for Youth Development
Montana State University

210 Taylor Hall, Bozeman, MT 59717-3580.

Native Plant Materials Workshop

The American Seed Trade Association (ASTA) held its fifth annual Conservation Seed Workshop March 15-16 in Washington, D.C. Jointly hosted by ASTA, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Plant Materials Program, the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Interior's Bureau of Land Management, the goal of the event is to bring together seed professionals, government agencies and non-profit groups to explore opportunities to improve native plants used in conservation, reclamation and restoration activities.

For more information about ASTA, visit it's Web site at: www.amseed.com/.

2007 Upcoming Events

March 31 GRAZE-A-PALOOZA conference, White Eagle Conference Center, Hamilton, New York.

Aug.7-8 Nebraska Grazing Conference, Kearney, NE. For more information visit: www.grassland.unl.edu/grazeconf.htm

GLCI Specialists

For more information about GLCI activities in your region, contact one of the GLCI Specialists listed below. For phone and e-mail information go to the GLCI website at www.glci.org and click on "Who's Involved."

Located in Fort Worth, Texas
Kim Stine, National GLCI Coordinator
Reggie Blackwell
Chuck Stanley

Located in Portland, Oregon
Jeff Repp
Gene Fults

Located in Greensboro, North Carolina
Kevin Ogles
Michael Hall

To contact the person who oversees GLCI activities within your state, go to the GLCI website at www.glci.org and click on "Who's Involved," then click on the State GLCI Coordinators link.

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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Dairy Industry
Howard Straub
(517) 323-8575

National Association of Conservation Districts
Krysta Harden
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National Cattlemen's Beef Association
Tamara Thies
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National Farmers Union
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Society for Range Management
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