

Grazing Plan Will Eliminate the Need to Hit Panic Button

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Around mid-June to early July, Mother Nature usually kicks summer into gear. The first noticeable symptom in the upper Great Plains is an increase in temperature and a decrease in moisture.

Determining if a drought is in progress or one is simply experiencing good haying weather is a thin line. A concern, however, surfaces that livestock feed may be in short supply. Panic may be too harsh of a word, but some producers do panic.

Before the panic button is pushed, some simple principles need to be noted. If a grazing system is not in place, now is the time for action.

Go see a grazing specialist and get a plan started. The North Dakota State University Extension Service or Natural Resources Conservation Service, located in almost every county in the country, could help a producer get started.

A decade of poor grazing management will take several grazing seasons to correct so normal production can occur. Operations that have effective grazing systems in place are in a position to manage through dry times as well as wet times without upsetting the focused direction of the ranch operation.

A basic principle of grazing management calls for 30 pounds of dry matter per day for a 1,200-pound cow/calf pair. A similar amount is destined to end up in a haystack somewhere for every day the 1,200-pound cow needs to be fed when confined.

Granted, these are basic numbers that have a significant cushion for waste and some carryover. Larger cows need more and smaller cows need less, but if a producer can find six months of grazing, then six 1,000-pound bales should get baled up and hauled home to provide a feed base for the nongrazing months and adequate acres need to be available during the grazing period.

How many acres does it take? Producers can find the answer to that question by visiting a range specialist familiar with their local landscape. For producers stocking 1,200-pound cows in southwestern North Dakota on

lowlands, 1.43 acres per animal a month is needed under good range conditions. That figure goes all the way up to 6.88 acres per animal a month in pastures that are in fair range condition, but dry, according to Lee Manske, Dickinson Research Extension Center range specialist.

Upland landscapes in good range condition could be stocked at 2.29 acres per animal a month with 1,200-pound cows. These generic stocking rates equate to just less than 14 grazing acres per cow. In addition, six acres are needed for hay, provided 1,000 pounds of hay is harvested from each acre.

In a normal year, 2,000 productive acres would support 100 mother cows and their calves until weaning and allow producers to get a good night's sleep. If you travel east, by the time you get out of North Dakota, you could very easily be closer to 1,300 acres and if you travel farther west or to drier climates in general, the acre requirement is going to go up.

None of us have a direct line to Mother Nature. Even Mother Nature simply averages the good with the bad and goes on from year to year. But in these years, where it appears to be drying out, take a quick count of your acres and your cattle. Figure out what type of land you are grazing, and what your typical hay yields are going to be, and get a good estimate of the weight of your cows.

If the numbers start to add up to more than what the books are telling you, a survival plan needs to be put in place, which means the producer sells cows or buys hay. Don't panic. Assess your operation first, seek out good advice, develop a plan and stick to it.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0306.

WANTED

A working ranch in southwestern North Dakota capable of running 100 cow calf pairs. The cows should weigh 1,200 pounds and include 600 acres of hay land and 1,400 acres of good, upland pasture with excellent water.

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