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## BeefTalk: Improper Grazing Steals From the Future



**Correct pasture stocking rates and grazing plans are essential.**

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

Proper cattle management means proper pasture management.

Correct pasture stocking rates and grazing plans are essential for the short run and the long-term survival of a beef operation. Producers have many approaches to grazing systems. The key point is to have a plan because improper grazing steals from the future.

Simply utilizing grass or forage of any type on a production whim is a mistake. Minor stocking rate adjustments are all right because of above-normal or below-normal precipitation. Adjustments need

### Images

#### What Every Beef Producer Should Know:

- Ecological site classification and stocking rate of available pasture
- How to calculate available animal unit months of available pasture
- How to calculate total pounds of beef to graze on available pasture
- How to convert total pounds of beef to number of head

What Every Beef Producer Should Know

## columns

### [BeefTalk: BeefTalk: Improper Grazing Steals From the Future](#) (2017-04-20)

Correct pasture stocking rates and grazing plans are essential. [FULL STORY](#)

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to be minor, and even the adjustments need to be options within the plan.

Cattle allotments and pasture assignments are being planned for the pastures the Dickinson Research Extension Center (DREC) manages. Beef producers should be doing the same for their summer grazing units.

The basic grazing system should not change from year to year. Keeping up and monitoring the system is important.

Let's look at an example. This year, one unit the center manages has not had a consistent annual grazing plan. That's because the center has not always managed the unit. Now that the center again is managing the unit, the question is, "How many cow-calf pairs should the center stock within a re-implemented twice-over grazing system?"

This is not "lean on the gate and guess" but rather an answerable question. As with any grazing unit, stock conservatively at the start and plan for stocking rate adjustments as the grassland or forage base improves.

What numbers do you use? Begin by consulting a grazing expert. In the center's case, Lee Manske is the DREC range specialist, so we have good advice. For producers, start with a visit with the neighbors, the local county office of the Extension Service and the Natural Resource Conservation Service office.

For the unit in question, Manske reviewed ecological site maps and determined the unit has a stocking rate of 1.92 acres per animal unit month (AUM), or 790 AUMs of forage for the 1,519 acres of pasturelands. This information gives us what we need to know.

The grazing system is 4.5 months, early June to mid-October. The 790 AUMs are divided by 4.5 months (or actual days) to determine the actual number of animal units available. Dividing by the number of months or days of grazing spreads the total AUMs over the full grazing season. In this case, 175 (790 divided by 4.5) animal units are needed to graze for 4.5 months.

An animal unit is defined as a 1,000-pound cow plus the calf, so one could say 175 cow-calf pairs with the cows weighing 1,000 pounds each. In this case, 175 1,000-pound cows could be anticipated for a total herd weight of 175,000 (175 times 1,000) pounds.

Not all cows weigh 1,000 pounds, so now an adjustment is made for the actual average weight of the cows that are going to graze. The average weight of the cows is critical for proper AUM stocking and percentage of utilization. The center's cows average 1,462 pounds, so the center could stock 120 (175,000 divided by 1,462) cow-calf pairs on this grazing unit.

Then, each producer needs to predetermine the

percentage of utilization desired. Pastures in poor shape require lower utilization, with the anticipation of greater utilization in future years as the pasture improves. The goal is 100 percent utilization of the calculated AUMs available through a proper grazing system.

For the center and this grazing unit, the plan is to stock at only 65 percent of the previously calculated full stocking rate. That would be almost 114,000 (175,000 times 65 percent) pounds of cattle in early June. So, at the desired percentage of utilization, the center could stock 78 (114,000 divided by 1,462) cow-calf pairs.

That is lots of math, but the answer is to know what is proper for this point in time to achieve the desired grazing outcome. If the center continues to manage this unit, the goal is to approach 120 pairs gradually.

The point is that the unloading of cattle at a pasture gate is not a “lean on the gate” decision.

Perhaps one wonders why weather is so often the first thing in a conversation, but once one appreciates weather impacts, one understands why we start the day with the weather news. In the ranching community, weather is serious and, even though ranchers cannot control Mother Nature, plans can be developed and put in place to accommodate the weather.

Beef operations with effective grazing systems in

place are in a position to manage through drought and wet times without upsetting the focused direction of the ranch operation. I cannot tell a producer how the summer is going to turn out. I can tell anyone that the cattle will have grass, the cows will re-breed and the calves will gain well because the center has a plan that supports long-term grass production.

No one at the center will panic; they'll just have options if needed. Develop a plan and stick to it.

May you find all your ear tags.

For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or [✉kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

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