

# BeefTalk: Ranching is a Balance Among Land, Grass and Beef

## How much grass is available and how many cows can the ranch run?

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Management generally implies input followed by discussion, decision and implementation. The amount of input generally reflects the seriousness of the topic.

Recently, the Dickinson Research Extension Center discussed the allocation of cattle resources. Believe me, everyone sat up at the table. Why?

Well, essentially, dear to the heart of every rancher is cows. Any discussion that may impact cow numbers is dear to the heart.

At the same time, the amount of available grass is just as critical because anyone in the “cow business” really is in the “grass business.” Both are intertwined and often swapped back and forth.

Two critical questions crop up. How much grass is available and how many cows can the ranch run?

These questions can start a long discussion with considerable seasoning, depending on the year. This year’s mood, a year with ample precipitation and grass, is considerably different than last year, which was a year with little precipitation and grass.

One thing became clear early in the discussion. There is excellent scientific data that allows for the evaluation of a ranch and the carrying capacity in regard to cattle numbers.

Gone are the days of guessing. There are newer programs and tools available to determine a pasture’s carrying capacity or that of the whole ranch.

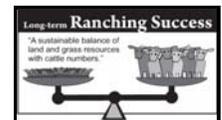
The computer has changed the ability to make decisions and the speed at which decisions can be made. One can find an “ecosite” description of land parcels through a process that certainly is simplified.

The center still has everyone sitting on the edge of his or her chair ready for input once the preliminary stocking rates are estimated. Sound science is the base of the estimates, but regardless of how sound the science is, when the output does not match the historical use, eyebrows are raised.

In the end, each ecosite, or one could say soil type, has only so much capacity to produce vegetation. The vegetation (which producers call forage) is produced only with timely precipitation.

Not all the production is available for consumption and, depending on past usage, not all the production has the same value. Having said that, the center, as with most producers, needs to evaluate and implement a base grazing system that places cattle on pasture for a desirable amount of time without having to move

### Images



Long-term Ranching Success - "A sustainable balance of land and grass resources with cattle numbers."

cattle excessively.

This is not a discussion of grazing systems but baseline carrying capacity so the appropriate cowherd size can be verified. The data reveals large variations within pastures.

Not all pastures are created equal. Each pasture is made up of productive and not so productive ecosites. The stocking rate for each individual site must be determined and then all the sites added to determine the number of acres per animal unit month (AUM) per pasture.

For instance, one section at the center has four pastures. The initial calculations for each of the four pastures are 46 AUM, 36 AUM, 43 AUM and 39 AUM. This is based on the initial evaluation of the ecosites per pasture for a total of 164 AUM for the section.

If the center is to utilize the section for 4.5 months, then the number of 1,200-pound cows and their calves that could run on the section would be 32 cow/calf pairs. Well, there go the eyebrows because the historical use of the section has been greater than that.

However, discussions will follow, additional input will be obtained and decisions will be made. In the end, getting a handle on cattle costs means getting a handle on a ranch's base unit, which is grass.

Everything except the grass is an add-on. Those add-ons carry with them additional expense.

The add-ons impact time, operations and the bottom line. They can mean more money spent and not more coming in.

Time will tell, but a sustainable balance of land and grass resources with cattle numbers is critical to the operation of a ranch. The discussion continues, so more later.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

For more information, contact the NDBCIA office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to <http://www.CHAPS2000.com> on the Internet.

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Attachments



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(bt072309.pdf - 26.70 Kb)



EPS - Long-term Ranching Succes - "A sustainable balance of land and grass resources with cattle numbers."  
(bt072309.eps - 202.17 Kb)