

BeefTalk: Where Is the Grass?

Have a Grazing Plan!

A producer sleeps much better when 30 pounds of dry matter per day are known to be available for a 1,200 pound cow while she is grazing.

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One does need to ask where the grass is. The snow still covers the ground, at least in southwestern North Dakota. Although livestock producers may question spring turnout dates and slightly modify grazing plans, this is one case where the cows outshine the wheat.

Cool-season cereal grains and other crops have a wide range of planting dates. However, producers do like to get in the field early. This year, early planting was not March and, more than likely, not April, either. For the crop producer, the term early certainly is looking more like late, although most would accept early May as normal.

The cow business is a grass business, and despite the wide range in highs and lows, grass seems to adjust quite well. In fact, the basis of a good grazing system is the dependability of grass, so understanding grazing systems and grass management is critical to the cattle operation. It is well-known that cool-season grasses and summer warm-season grasses are distinctly different, but both are required to have an effective grazing program.

Granted, alternative grazing systems can be created, but the original native upper Great Plains prairies were and still are a cattle producer's dream. Not to utilize this resource in a sustaining way costs the producer and all those who will follow.

The bottom line is that effective grazing strategies utilize cattle because cattle do a good job of keeping the grasslands healthy. If there is a golden rule among producer grazing plans, it is perhaps simply to have a plan. The plan should reflect known biological principles that enhance perennial grass production and be manageable by the producer.

At the Dickinson Research Extension Center, the grazing season starts in May. The cows and calves will be turned out on crested wheat pasture in early May and remain there until May 30. Some producers may do turnout the last week of April because the general rule of thumb is to do it during the third-leaf stage for cool-season grasses. The four weeks of grazing cool-season grass provide a good start for the summer grazing season.

As the summer grazing season is planned, effective rotation systems will help harvest a very heavy calf and keep the grasslands in peak condition for centuries to come. Dates are key, as well as proper stocking rates that fit the location.

This year, the center will start cow/calf pairs grazing on native range at the start of June. They will be sent to their second rotational pasture by mid-June and to their third pasture at the end of June.

Three pastures with a quick rotation will be completed by mid-July. This allows for the stimulation of the grass plants, which increases pasture productivity. Following the first round of short rotations through the three pastures, the three pastures will be grazed again for approximately 30 days each to complete the grazing season in mid-October.

There are other plans, but the important point from the producer's perspective is to consult with a local range scientist and develop a good, solid plan. 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.

Those cool-season grasses are productive, but the end of May will be here quickly. Now would be a good time to plan the next step and have a matching warm-season grass-grazing system to send the cattle to. Starting now will plant the seed for more planning next winter. With some investment in fence and watering, planned grazing becomes a reality.

Are you moving your cattle, managing your forage and planning for the future? Regardless of the answer, individual grazing systems should be developed in consultation with a specialist at the center or other grassland management professionals. If one still doubts the influence management can have on long-term grassland, stop by one of the many producers who have implemented long-term grazing systems. Enjoy some conversation with those producers and really take a good look at planned grassland management because the real image is worth a ton of words.

May you find all your ear tags.