Gearing Up for Grazing

Public Value Statement
Grazing start date is one of the most important decisions made by land managers, impacting forage production, livestock production and ecosystem health. Selecting the proper grazing start date increases productivity and resilience of grazing resources, enhancing the sustainability of ranches and rural communities. Enhanced health of these ecosystems will benefit the public by enhancing biodiversity, water quality, wildlife habitat, and opportunities for recreation.

The Situation
Many livestock producers in North Dakota start grazing pastures prior to plants reaching grazing readiness, the developmental stage at which they can withstand the stress of grazing. Starting grazing too early reduces plant leaf area for photosynthesis; reducing plant vigor is reduced and forage production, and increasing disease, insect and weed infestations. Grazing too early can be costly in terms of total forage production during the entire grazing season. Grazing before grass plants reach the grazing readiness phase causes a reduction in herbage production, which can reduce stocking rate and animal performance. Pastures and range damaged by grazing too early may take several years of deferment or even rest before the stand regains productivity. However, grazing too late increases forage loss and waste through trampling or reduced palatability, and increases the presence of exotic cool-season grasses.

Extension Response
In 2017 NDSU Extension initiated the Gearing up for Grazing Program. The goals of this project were to: 1) enhance NDSU Extension Agent’s knowledge of grazing readiness, while establishing new relationships with producers in their counties and 2) improve the condition of grazing resources through improving producer knowledge of grazing readiness. This was accomplished by developing training opportunities and curriculum for agents. Agents in 22 counties then worked with ranchers to monitor and report the growth stage of key range and pasture species until they reach grazing readiness. Monitoring data was utilized in the development of Extension curriculum including: 1 Extension publication, 1 presentation, 1 video and 7 news releases. To date this curriculum has been presented to 248 people at meeting and ranch visits.

Impacts

**Extension agents involved in Gearing Up for Grazing:**

- **100%** increased understanding of grazing readiness
- **100%** increased ability to identify grasses and growth stages
- **94%** increased confidence in engaging with producers
- **86%** increased interactions with producers

**Producers involved in Gearing Up for Grazing:**

- **77%** increased their understanding of how to determine grazing readiness
- **41%** intended to change how they selected their grazing start date
- **25%** made management changes, impacting 4,840 acres of range and pasture land
Feedback

“As a new agent I really appreciated the opportunity to reach out to area producers about coming onto their land and doing the grazing readiness program. The couple producers I worked with are new individuals I call on when I do have questions about what is going on in the county. This program gave me the chance to build relationships and also get out into the country side. Both of which are not easy feats only being in the position a couple months before participating in the Grazing Readiness Program. I also was able to hone in on my plant ID and also evaluate pastures in Adams County to help me better understand management practices and potential needs that could be met by Extension programming.” Hannah Nordby, Adams County ANR Agent

“The Gearing Up for Grazing presentation sparked a lot of management between about 35 producers questions in Aneta at the Cattle Update this February. What I most enjoyed about teaching the grazing readiness presentation and working with producers to monitor their grasses in the Spring is that this program is just the beginning of the conversation about pasture and land management for livestock. It led to an understanding that identifying key species to help monitor for grazing readiness can keep desirable plants coming back, which helps keep pastures healthy. This program set up the basics for further management discussions.”

Katelyn Hain, Nelson County ANR Agent

Producers in McHenry County that participated in the Gearing Up for Grazing Program provided the following feedback:

- “I really liked the grazing talk you did in the county and would love to listen to more.”
- “Has really sparked my interest in what is going on in my own pastures.”
- “I was better able to watch my grass this year and know when to pull my cows out.”

Collaborators

Kevin Sedivec, Extension Rangeland Management Specialist; Hannah Nordby, Adams County ANR Agent; Erin Gaugler, former Bowman County ANR Agent; Kelcey Hoffmann, former Cass County ANR Agent; Greg Benz, Dunn County ANR Agent; Katie Wirt, former Grant/Sioux County ANR Agent; Tessa Keller, Grant/Sioux County ANR Agent; Penny Nester, Kidder County ANR Agent; Sheldon Gerhardt, Logan County ANR Agent; Rachel Wald, McHenry County ANR Agent; Crystal Schaunaman, McIntosh County ANR Agent; Morgan Wisness, former McKenzie County ANR Agent; Devan Leo, McKenzie County ANR Agent; Calla Edwards, McLean County ANR Agent; Craig Askim, Mercer County ANR Agent; Marissa Leier, former Morton County ANR Agent; Katelyn Hain, Nelson County ANR Agent; Rick Schmidt, Oliver County ANR Agent; Yolanda Schmidt, Pierce County ANR Agent; Nicole Wardner, Sheridan County ANR Agent; Shelby Hewson, Slope County ANR Agent; Lindy Berg, Towner County ANR Agent; Paige Brummund, Ward County ANR Agent; Lindsay Maddock, Wells County ANR Agent; NDSU Agriculture Communications

Resource Links

NDSU Extension Gearing Up for Grazing Website: https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/naturalresources/gearing-up-for-grazing

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