

IMPACT



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Management Intensive Grazing (MiG)—Does It Work?

The Situation

According to Idaho “Natural Resource Trends” (NRCS, Dec. 2000) 11.8 million acres of Idaho is privately owned grazing land. Of this, 1.3 million acres are domestic (fenced and managed) pastureland. Idaho domestic pastures are generally grazed season-long. According to Gerrish and Roberts (1999) pastures grazed longer than 30 days have a harvesting efficiency of 40% or less. High stocking rates and low stock densities are common, leading to severe grazing, which limits re-growth potential and overall yield. Idaho domestic pastures typically produce 50% or less of their potential due to poor production and poor harvesting efficiency. Pasture operators lack motivation to improve management because: 1) conventional management has traditionally been viewed as adequate; 2) good irrigated pastures are undervalued; 3) pastures appear to be more resilient to abuse than other crops; 4) land typically planted to domestic pasture is perceived as marginal and therefore of limited financial value; and 5) producers have not recognized the ecological value of pastures.

As pressures from non-grazing interests increase on use of federal grazing lands, the traditional forage base for beef production in Idaho is shrinking. Further stress on the total forage base comes from the expanding dairy industry. Finally, the cost of producing livestock with traditional fossil fuel based systems is constantly rising as the cost of fuel, fertilizer and equipment increases faster than the value of the products. As a result, livestock operators are leaving the industry and their rural communities.

Developing, adapting and implementing more economically efficient and environmentally acceptable methods for harvesting and utilizing forages underpins the long-term success of this industry and the Idaho families it supports. Increasing the productivity of domestic pastures in Idaho offers an opportunity to maintain or expand the forage base that supports the livestock industries and the surrounding communities.

Our Response

To improve livestock operator understanding and implementation of the principles of Management intensive Grazing (MiG), seven outreach programs featuring multi-day hands on workshops for operators have been held across southern Idaho. Topics covered in the intensive 4 day, hands-on workshop include the five principles of grazing, tools for managing grazing, anatomy and physiology of forage plants, grazing cell design, low stress livestock handling techniques, and livestock health considerations. Participants in these workshops have come away with a better understanding of the principles involved and have put what they learned into practice on their own places. This growing network of operators are developing, adapting and implementing more economically efficient and environmentally acceptable methods for harvesting and utilizing forages.

Program Outcomes

“Does managing grass intensively really pay dividends?” The following case studies are offered as proof. The classic answer of this author and others would be “it depends!” Applying the five principals of grazing properly can yield from 50 to 70% more grass. Getting to this level of utilization is not simple nor is there a recipe for success. Paying attention to the details can and does yield significant increases in forage utilized and perhaps more importantly, the bottom-line. The following actual case studies from graduates of the Lost Rivers Grazing Academy will help bear out this claim.

Case number 1: Before attending a class in 2001, pasture was being leased for 20 head of horses and mules for a 4-month season on about 50 acres of flood irrigated ground. Feed was short and the pastures were deteriorating and becoming weedier with each passing season. With the application of the principals learned at the workshop, the producer now runs 70 head of horses and mules, has enough aftermath pasture to graze 30 head of dry cows for two months and the vigor of the pastures is improving. Conservatively, this is an increase of \$4600 in gross revenue. Plans are to increase the number of horses and mules grazed to 100 in 2004.

Case number 2: Before attending a class in 2002, 240 head of outside cow/calf pairs were being pastured under four center pivots (approximately 540 acres) for a 6-month season. The producer had just installed the system with the idea of grazing cattle rather than haying the ground. Some of the pastures looked more like golf course greens than irrigated pastures and others needed to be mowed for hay. Currently the producer is pasturing 580 head of cow/calf pairs. More of the pastures are being properly grazed and a lot less hay needs to be put up. At \$15 per pair the gross has been increased by \$30,600. The producer is content with the current stocking level but the potential is there to run approximately 200 additional pairs. Weaning weights on the calves coming off these pastures is 75 pounds heavier than their herd mates running on federal ranges. At \$1.00 per pound, that is an increase in gross revenue of \$43,500.

Case number 3: A producer implemented the principles learned immediately after attending a grazing school in the fall of 2003. The workshop concluded on Thursday afternoon and by Saturday 250 head of dry cows were “wire broke” and introduced to MiG. In a field (approximately 80 acres) of aftermath hay that traditionally held the lease cattle for 4 or 5 days, an additional 12 days were gained through forage allocation rather than giving the cattle free rein to use the entire pasture. On an animal unit month (AUM) basis that is an increase of 57.5 AUM’s or an additional \$590 in income. Plans are to implement the grazing principals learned on the entire ranch and get out of the haying business all together.

The Future: The results reported here are a few of the successes reported by graduates of the Lost River Grazing Academy. If these results intrigue you and you want to learn more, sign up for the next workshop to be held in Salmon, Idaho at the Nancy M. Cummings Research and Extension Center in June 2004.

For More Information

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