

IMPACT



Custer County Extension, PO Box 160, Main Street, Challis, Idaho 83226; 208-879-2344; Fax: 208-879-5246

Management Intensive Grazing—It Works!

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 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, the traditional federal grazing lands forage base for beef production in Idaho gets smaller. The expanding dairy industry creates further stress on the total forage base. 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), nine outreach programs featuring multi-day hands on workshops for operators have been held across southern Idaho. Some of the 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 in grazing management and have put what they learned into

practice on their own farms and ranches. A growing network of operators are developing, adapting and implementing more economically efficient and environmentally acceptable methods for harvesting and utilizing forages.

Program Outcomes

Properly 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 a graduate of the Lost Rivers Grazing Academy will help support this claim.

One producer implemented the grazing 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 an 80 acre field 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.

This same producer approached the author in September of 2004. He was trying to determine if he should hay the 80 acre field mentioned above or graze it. Upon review of the field, we determined that there was approximately 1.5 T of grass/alfalfa hay per acre if he was to hay the ground. His gross income would be \$7200 at \$60/T if a buyer could be found.

With a full time job in town as a teacher, getting the hay up in a timely manner was also an issue. Using local custom costs \$35/T it was determined that it would cost \$4200 to put up the hay if a contractor could be found.

The other option was to graze the field. To get an idea of how many cattle and what the potential income might be we made the following assumptions. At 1.5 T/A or 3000 lb of forage per acre and a 60 percent utilization rate he could

pasture 2 cow/calf pairs or 2.7 yearlings per acre for a month. Using this scenario a total of 160 cow/calf pairs or 213 yearlings could be grazed and would generate \$2560 in income.

The question for the producer was whether or not he was willing to “lose” \$440 (the difference between selling the hay and grazing) factoring in the fact that he had the pasture cattle and he did not have a contractor nor a guaranteed sale for the hay.

The producer grazed 109 cow/calf pairs for 30 days and 130 dry cows for 35 days. The cattle generated \$3564 or \$564 more than haying the land with no guarantee of a sale or someone willing to put up the hay.

The Future

Results reported here are two examples among many 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 2005.

For More Information

James N. Hawkins, Extension Educator
Custer County Extension
PO Box 160
Challis, Idaho 83226
208-879-2344
Fax: 208-879-5246
Email: jhawkins@uidaho.edu
When making inquiries please refer to CD05CU01.doc. 0105.

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