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## **Making Stocking Rates Work**

It is the time of year when ruminates are getting turned out onto high quality, green, growing grass. It might seem now like there is an over abundance of forage, but do you have a plan for properly stocking pastures? Whether it's native rangeland, cool season pasture or annual forages, proper use of pasture is a key to livestock operation success. To properly manage the land, a producer must be familiar with the amount of dry matter forage the pasture can produce and the forage required over the grazing season by each animal and the entire herd. Using a management program focused on stocking rates allows livestock producers to efficiently manage forage resources. Here are some key factors influencing stocking rates.

**Grazing management.** Continuous, season-long grazing can be an inefficient way to harvest plant growth. Losses due to trampling, plant maturation and leaf death, wastage, insect loss, disease, and degree of use are all higher with continuous grazing than with rotational grazing. A simple rotation involves two or more separate pastures that are grazed only once during the growing season. Such systems can provide 20% higher grazing capacity than a continuous grazing system. More intensive short-duration or time-controlled grazing systems that involve numerous areas grazed several times each season can allow up to 30-50% higher stocking rates than a continuous grazing system. These rotational grazing systems improve livestock distribution, reduce waste, allow longer periods of no grazing rest, and maintain plants in a more nutritious vegetative growth stage for longer periods of time.

**Weather.** Suggested initial stocking rate assumes "normal" weather, good plant vigor, uniform grazing patterns and level consumption. These assumptions are often incorrect, so stocking rate must be managed to fit the situation. Weather variation most frequently dictates stocking rate adjustments. We've been dry, until recently, so don't assume forage production this year will be "normal". Economic signals say expand, but what does weather say?

**Plant vigor.** Prior over-grazing or adverse weather conditions may reduce desirable plant vigor. Many areas have been dealing with prolonged drought which decreases plant health, vigor, diversity and stand density. Keep an eye on the plants for vigor and determine if there are management issues that might help enhance the plant component of the grazing operation.

**Forage intake.** Forage intake by a group of livestock during a grazing season varies very little, so stocking rate adjustments aren't needed. However, environmental stress, forage quality and previous nutrition of the animal may influence level of forage consumption greatly. Plan and monitor your pasture routinely to enhance your pasturelands and the condition of your cattle.

If cow-herd expansion is in your plans, what's the first thing to do to provide more pasture? Should you rent or buy additional acres, add legumes and/or fertilizer to increase production, or perhaps increase the number of paddocks? Traditionally, the thought is more land for more grass but, depending on current use of grazing systems, inputs into existing systems might be cheaper than purchasing land, especially as grass acres are rapidly disappearing.

An action item the grazing manager needs to consider in growing more forage is to plan for additional cross fencing to improve grazing management. Increasing the number of paddocks is the first option to evaluate toward increasing the grazing management. Adding cows also means more winter feed, so that portion of forage inventory also needs to be considered.

Keep all of these things in mind when planning on how you will manage your grass resources this spring and summer. Good luck and keep praying for rain this summer.