

Pasture Production

You can't manage what you don't measure — and record.

by Rachel Robinson, American Angus Association

Pasture management can be put on the back burner sometimes, or it can become more of a “gut feeling” based on cow condition. But Hugh Aljoe, director of producer relations for the Noble Research Institute, encouraged “intentional pasture management” during a Learning Lounge session at the Cattle Industry Convention and National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) Trade Show in San Antonio in February.

What does it mean to be intentional about your pastures?

Aljoe shared to intentionally manage your pastures, you have to ask two questions:

- What needs to be done, and why?
- How to do it, and when?

First, he told producers to assess the soils on your ranch to “discover, plan, manage and establish your production potential;” do physical, chemical and biological assessments of your pastures to be able to “prioritize management activities to address limitations;” and “develop a monitoring plan to measure the effectiveness of the management.”

When you evaluate the physical attributes of your soil, you should look at the soil color, soil structure, biological activity, rooting resistance and the soil smell.

The chemical measurements would be on organic matter, which should be 2.5% or greater; phosphorus; potassium; nitrogen; and pH-optimum, which is 5.5-7.5,

5.0 minimum for Bermuda grass. There are three biological tests Aljoe recommended producers use: Haney Test, PLFA (phospholipid fatty acid) Test and Cornell Labs test.

When it comes to the forages, Aljoe recommended taking five steps:

1. Develop a carrying capacity and stocking rate and understand the potential and variance.
2. Develop a forage (soil) management plan prior to overlaying a grazing plan to schedule and prioritize management activities.
3. Develop a water year table to have an accurate picture of your rainfall in a given year and monitor water availability.
4. Develop an intuitive ranch assessment scorecard to monitor conditions through actual observations.
5. Develop grazing enclosures, photo points and transects to monitor grazing intensity and trends in the condition.

“There’s no such thing as average rainfall,” he said. “Know where you are versus what your water table needs.”

He said although most producers typically do pay attention to averages, actually recording them greatly benefits the decision-making on the farm or ranch. Optimal production will never happen if producers don’t manage their pastures.



Getting started

The Noble Research Institute provides the “Intuitive Assessment Stocking Rate Scorecard” for producers as a resource to keep records of things producers would normally just make a mental note on. It gathers “observational, simple data, or inputs and forage usage” in one place and uses a simple rating system to help producers have an accurate stocking rate. Using planned versus actual winter feed costs can help producers decide if they’re overstocked.

“Start looking for management changes if you are feeding more than \$200 per cow in the winter,” Aljoe said. “If you are on native pasture, you will want to change management to minimize supplementation if you

are seeing more than \$100 per cow on cubes.”

For producers wondering where to start, Aljoe recommended two things to focus on during the coming year: photo points and grazing enclosures.

Taking photos of your pastures is the simplest way to see the results of your pasture management decisions. He encouraged the photos to be taken at specific times of year in specific areas of certain pastures. Grazing enclosures allow you to monitor grazing within a management plan. Aljoe recommended selecting a spot in your best pasture and move it each year to see the grazed area compared to the ungrazed area.

Many producers may consider carrying capacity and stocking rate

to be the same, but Aljoe points out they’re different. The carrying capacity is based on the forage availability; whereas, stocking rate is a measure of the demand. He recommended adjusting stocking rate based on the carrying capacity of your pastures. Carrying capacity should be at 80%, he said.

“Everyone looks smart when it rains,” Aljoe said. “But when a drought comes, you find out who the real managers are.” **AJ**

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