THE GRAZIER

Get Into the Habit of Grazing Distribution

In simple terms, grazing distribution is the dispersion of livestock grazing within a management unit or area.

Uniform distribution of grazing by livestock is essential for producers striving for efficient use of forage resources. Obtaining uniform patterns over the entire grazing area from the first day the pasture is used is important since livestock establish their grazing habits when they first enter a new pasture.

Tools for Grazing

Several tools can be used in grazing distribution. These can be divided into two groups: normal management practices and management changes and/or capital improvements.

Among the easiest tools to use in managing grazing distribution are sale/mineral feeders, oilers, dust bags or rubbing posts, winter feeding and prescribed burning.

Moving salt/mineral feeders away from water is one way of improving grazing distribution. The new location should be in undergrazed areas and your cattle should know where it is. Move the feeders whenever cattle congregate and begin to trample the vegetation.

Traditionally, producers say that cattle must have water after salting. Recent information indicates that livestock do not utilize salt or mineral and then water, or vice versa. In areas where water has high salt content or natural salt licks occur, changing salt locations will not work.

Oilers, rubbing posts or dust bags can be moved to improve grazing distribution. They should not be placed between water and salt, or salt between the water and the oilers. They should be used at locations throughout the pasture as needed to encourage uniform use of pasture.

One of the most under-utilized grazing distribution tools is winter feeding. Feeding in those parts of the pasture which have not been utilized and moving the feeding grounds throughout the under-utilized area will make the area more desirable for cattle grazing.

Continual feeding of livestock on pasture or rangeland results in trampling of vegetation where feeding occurs. Feeding in the same location will bare the area, opening it to erosion.

In the spring the bare areas will be the first to green up with cool-season forage species and cattle will begin grazing these areas first. Once the pattern is established, the herd will return to the area throughout the season.

Prescribed buring can be a grazing distribution tool. When distribution probems exist, annually burning those areas which will burn, together with the previously mentioned tools, can change the grazing distribution on your pastures. Cattle will prefer forage from burned areas.

Another management change that can accomplish better grazing distribution is the spot treatment of under-utilized areas with fertilizer. It is possible to promote cattle use by fertilizing small areas(2 to 5 acres), or spot-burning (5 to 10 acres) in areas of under-utilization. These practices should be limited to extreme cases where management tools have not accomplished grazing changes. No attempt should be made to use the same area for spot treatments two years in a row.

If normal management distribution aids fail to produce the desired results, a management change or capital improvement is often necessary. Included are water developments, fencing and more intensive grazing management.

Water is the most useful grazing distribution tool, although it represents a major capital outlay. If a new water location is needed, it should be developed considering three criteria: 1. water quality; 2. amount of water available; and 3. location with the pasture.

Quality and quantity of water are the most important factors in developing a new watering location. If a new water source is developed in a pasture to be used with an old pond, the distibution pattern may simply be reversed, since the quality of the new water source may be much higher than that in the pond.

By having the new water source contmllable (able to turn off and on) cattle can be moved from one watering source to another. Water development includes ponds, springs, dugouts, windmills, water wells and pipelines.

If a new pond is being built, lay a water line under the dam and develop a trough below the dam. Fencing out the entire pond increases both quality and quantity of the water and protects your investment.

Excluding livestock will prevent them from walking on ice during the winter, reducing the probability of animals falling through the ice and drowning. It will also prevent them from bogging down in silt during periods of drought or low water. Also, livestock walking on the dam shortens structure life.

For large pastures, locate water sources so cattle don't have to travel more than one-half to three-fourths mile in rough terrain and no more than 1 1/2 mile on level terrain. Distance between water sources must be taken into account to ensure that animals can readily travel to all parts of the pasture.

Small ponds, pit ponds and spring developments should be used whenever possible instead of developing large ponds, windmills or water wells.

A new option for shallow wells and wet areas where spring developments are not possible is the solar-powered pump. In areas where water is difficult to obtain, pipelines can be used to transport water over long distances very efficiently.

If cross-fencing is a viable option for your farm or ranch, consider the following in determining where to fence: 1. current grazing patterns; 2. barriers (vegetation types, topography, water locations); and 3. manageability of the resulting pastures.

Cross-fencing can he done using conventional fencing or high voltage/low-impedance electric fencing (Australian-New Zealand type). The latter is the most cost-effective and is considered semi-permanent.

Intensively managed or mtational grazing to utilize forage with larger numbers of animals in a shorter time period is another option. This brings about more uniform grazing of the entire area and requires a much higher level of management than necessary under continuous or season-long grazing.

Rotational or controlled grazing requires cross-fencing, water and other adjustments to accomplish the management change.

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