

Grass Management Can Be a Juggling Act

by Mary Lou Peter

Much like a juggler makes every move with the next one in mind, so must a livestock producer always think about how next year's forage prospects will be affected by this year's ratio of livestock to grazing land.

"Managing grazing land for 2002 must include reduced stocking rates, both to protect future forage production and to maintain animal performance," says Paul Ohlenbusch, state agronomy leader and grazing management specialist with Kansas State University (K-State) Research and Extension. "If the amount of forage available is less than the animal requires, the animal's performance will be down. And overgrazing not only cuts the forage of the most desirable grass species, it forces animals to consume less palatable species, usually at a mature stage. That further reduces forage production and animal performance."

This year is one of those particularly challenging years because of drought conditions in the central Plains. Early April rains helped, but forage prospects are still tenuous at best, he says.

Both warm- and cool-season grasses store nutrients for their initial growth during late winter and early spring, Ohlenbusch says. "If plants are grazed too short in the previous season, they can't store the needed nutrients and will be slower to start growth the following spring. The result will be poor forage production in 2003."

In its April 8 weekly report, the Kansas Agricultural Statistics Service (KASS) rated Kansas pastures as 41% poor to very poor, 41% fair and 18% good.

"Dry, windy conditions have prevented pasture burning in many areas. Stockmen are concerned with dry conditions and grass prospects for the coming grazing season. Hay and forage supplies are generally adequate with only 21% of the state reporting short or very short supplies," KASS reported.

Leaving adequate leaf growth on forage grasses this fall is critical, Ohlenbusch says. He recommends a grazing height of 4 inches (in.) in eastern Kansas because the grasses there — predominately big bluestem and Indian grass — are taller grasses. In central areas where pastures are largely

composed of little bluestem and switchgrass, grasses can be grazed down to 3 in. The shorter western Kansas grasses — sideoats, grama and blue grama — can be grazed to 2 in.

"Grazing the grass shorter than the recommended height removes too much leaf area from the plants. It's important to leave enough leaf area to produce the foodstuffs needed to promote plant growth and ensure a healthy root system," he says.

Summer grazing of cool-season pastures, particularly during dry conditions, limits future production, Ohlenbusch adds.

"Economically, there's a simple rule of thumb — if the value of the gain per day of an animal is less than the cost per day to keep the animal, you are losing money," he says. "Aggressive harvesting of forage while conditions are dry normally leads to lower forage production, as well as an increase in less palatable grasses and greater weed problems. Pastures grazed short also can lead to increased water runoff and a greater risk of sediment, nutrient, bacteria and pesticide contamination in surface water."

Water supplies for the state's livestock continue to be a concern, Ohlenbusch says.

Stock water supplies continued to deteriorate the week ending April 7, according to the KASS weekly report. Forty-nine percent of the state reported adequate supplies, down from 55% the previous week. Stock water shortages were reported in all districts, but were the shortest in southern areas.

"Producers should carefully consider the cost of hauling water against feeding animals," says Ohlenbusch. "Livestock producers should take into account any costs of the water, including pumping and purchasing, and also should consider transportation costs, labor (time required to haul water), and fixed costs."

For additional management tips on how to deal with drought, visit www.angusjournal.com/drought/.



Editor's Note: Mary Lou Peter is a communications specialist with Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, which supplied this article.

Funds Available to Brands

The U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF) is accepting applications from U.S. companies interested in receiving matching funds to promote branded U.S. meat products in international markets.

To qualify for these funds, companies must have 500 or fewer employees, or be a producer cooperative or association. Allocations to private companies will be based on the expected effectiveness of the proposed activities and adherence to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) regulations governing the program.

The deadline for submission of proposals is June 15, although applications will be accepted as long as funds are available. Promotions funded under this program may be conducted between July 1, 2002, and June 30, 2003.

Companies that receive funding from USMEF will be charged a 5% administrative fee for participation in the program. USMEF also requires a \$100 submittal fee to accompany the company's request for funding.

Companies interested in the program should contact Barbara Watson at USMEF's Denver office for guidelines and proposal format. The address is: U.S. Meat Export Federation, Independence Plaza, 1050 17th St., Suite 2200, Denver, CO 80265; phone: (303) 623-MEAT; fax: (303) 623-0297; e-mail: bwatson@usmef.org.

The USMEF is the trade association responsible for developing international markets for the U.S. red meat industry and is funded by USDA, exporting companies, and the beef, pork, corn, sorghum and soybean checkoff programs.

