



# Mastering Mob Grazing

Ultra-high stock densities can yield impressive results

by *Kindra Gordon*

**T**he latest phenomenon among holistic grazing enthusiasts is a concept called mob grazing, which entails ultra-high concentrations of cattle per acre for a short period of time, and then giving the plants ample time for rest and regrowth.

To give an example of how concentrated the stock density is with mob grazing, in 1,000-pound cow terms, it may be 250-500 cows or more per acre. The key to this management approach is that the cows mob-graze the area for a short time, and then the land is given up to a year to rest.

What is the effect on the land?

Mob grazing is actually a tool that can restore grass health and productivity. As people come to understand this better, the grazing industry can expect to see more folks using it, believes Terry Gompert.

Gompert, who is a University of Nebraska

Extension educator as well as a beef producer, explains that the positive effect of mob grazing lies in the fact that when cattle are heavily concentrated on a few acres, no grass is left standing by the time they are moved off the area.

He points out that the tops of the plants are eaten by the livestock and will be recycled as urine or manure and the portions of the plant that were not eaten are mashed into the ground by the cows' hooves. Both actions help stimulate nutrient recycling for soil microorganisms and in turn boost plant regrowth.

"The objective is to create a major disturbance and then move on and give the pasture an extended period of rest before it is grazed again," Gompert says. Depending on the carrying capacity of the site and the herd density, this can mean moving animals every day or several times in one day. And you may only graze a piece of land once or twice a year — the extended rest period allows disturbed plants to recover.

## Does it work?

Gompert has followed the progress of several cow-calf producers who are

successfully integrating mob grazing into their operations.

He reports that once the stock densities are concentrated and the animals are moved one or more times per day, forage production is increasing two- to fourfold. Additionally, plant diversity is bouncing back.

Gompert credits this enhanced production to the soil building from the compaction of plants into the ground, the manure distribution from the high stock density and the control of unwanted plants because the cattle are so highly concentrated in a small area they are forced to eat or trample all the plants in the area.

As well, because the plants are given a long period of rest, they have healthy roots in the soil, which allows them to better withstand drought. And, they have a fuller canopy above ground during regrowth, which helps keep the soil cool and helps plants remain alive and growing longer into the growing season.

Gompert acknowledges that he has seen some variation in animal performance. In the majority of instances animals will gain weight or maintain condition, but he has seen some herds in which animals lose weight. So it is important to monitor animal performance.

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### Real-world example

Missouri rancher Greg Judy spent 14 years using management-intensive grazing (MiG) on his ranch, but four years ago he made the switch to mob or high-stock-density grazing.

Judy says he made the switch because with the MiG system he didn't feel he was sustainable. "We had three herds that we were moving, and we felt we were working all the time. And, by July we were always out of grass."

Judy has now combined the cattle into one herd — or mob — and moves it once a day. Using electric fence, he rotates through pastures twice per year, once during the growing season and once during the dormant season.

Today, he reports that his pastures are healthier; he has new plant species appearing, and he is attracting more wildlife. He has completely reduced his inputs, as well. He does not use lime, fertilizer or machinery, and he does not put up any hay. He estimates that he now only feeds hay about eight days out of the year, and he purchases that hay.

Most importantly, his labor demands have decreased, and Judy says his quality of life has "skyrocketed."

"With this type of grazing management," he says, "I've never been more excited about our future or any farm. It requires no inputs, and allows more grazing and more cattle. We're growing topsoil, we're sustainable now, and we have diversity."

### Tips for mob grazing

South African grazing guru Allan Savory developed the concept of mob grazing. If you are considering giving it a try, Nebraska's Terry Gompert and Missouri rancher Greg Judy offer these tips:

▶ *Allow ample recovery time.* All plants should be fully recovered before being grazed again. Gompert gives the example that with management-intensive grazing (MiG) many of the plant species decrease over time because not all plants have recovered before being grazed again. Key species return, but several others tend to decrease. With ample rest, mob grazing allows all plant species in the soil a chance to grow and flourish.

"Don't come back until plants are fully regrown," Judy adds.

▶ *Don't overgraze.* "The biggest mistake people make is overgrazing," Gompert says. "I call it scorched-earth grazing, and this creates animal performance issues." He suggests producers strive for 60% utilization of plants by livestock, with the remaining 40% knocked down as plant litter.

▶ *Be creative.* "People often say: I don't have enough cows, and I don't have enough time," Gompert says. He suggests combining your own herds or combining herds with a neighbor. The latter choice allows you to increase stock density and share land and labor.

▶ *Select for grass genetics.* Judy culls cattle that do not perform well on grass alone. "You need cattle with the right genetics," he says. "I like cattle with big guts."

▶ *Have a plan.* Judy plans ahead where he'll be grazing and what he'll stockpile for fall and winter grazing.

▶ *Make the cattle walk.* Judy creates a temporary lane with electric fence to give his cattle access to water. The lane is then moved with each rotation. He says he does not see a mob movement to the water unless a tank runs dry. He likes that he does not have any trails created to the water tank.

▶ *Back fences are optional.* Judy says some back fences may be needed when you are first starting a mob movement to prevent cattle from going back to regrow where they've been. But after a while you won't need them.

"Our cattle don't go back where they were the day before," he says.

▶ *Ground litter is key.* "I really feel like ground litter from plants is our farm's future," Judy says, explaining that earthworms and microbes turn the trampled litter into new soil. "Our soils are now 100% covered with new earthworm castings and the soil surface has worm holes drilled everywhere catching all water. This water catchment of our soil preserves moisture and allows our plants to continue to grow in dry times as well."

Because of this important role of the plant litter for creating topsoil, Judy emphasizes that once the litter is on the ground the cattle need to be moved, or they'll eat it.

▶ *Be willing to experiment.* "You will make mistakes. Push the outer limits; have fun," Judy says. But he also cautions, "Watch your animal performance. Are they relaxed? If they're anxious, something's not quite right."

Gompert also says experimenting to find what fits your operation will be necessary. "Different tools work in different environments," he says, adding, "You don't need to use ultra-high stock density every time. It's a tool like a hammer. You don't use a hammer for every job. Mob graze for one day and see what it does."

