



## Grazing Management

BY WILL LATHROP

Controlled grazing is the most powerful tool available to livestock producers to improve pasture productivity. The benefits go well beyond increased pasture productivity, but for now, we will limit it to forage management. The Kerr Center made the decision to change from continuous grazing to controlled grazing 26 years ago and we have never had any regrets.

Prior to 1990, we ran a few too many cows and had to fertilize our hay pastures in order to have enough hay during the fall and winter months. In a normal year, we would start feeding hay around the middle of December and quit at the end of March. A 20% supplement was also fed to maintain cow condition. Stocking rate during this time was around 3.5 acres/animal unit.

In 1990, Kerr Center ranch quit buying commercial fertilizers and started placing more emphasis on grazing management. Instead of spending money on fertilizer, we started developing watering points and dividing

pastures with permanent electric fence. The use of electric fence is the only cost effective way to implement a grazing system, and if you put the fence in the wrong place, it can be easily changed. Most of the mistakes we have made are in the area of pasture design. What may work in the dry seasons can be a nightmare during the wet seasons.

The mechanics of a grazing system are not that hard to understand. The manager has control of the number of animals on a given area of land for a specific amount of time. The manipulation of these three variables (number, area, and time) determines the

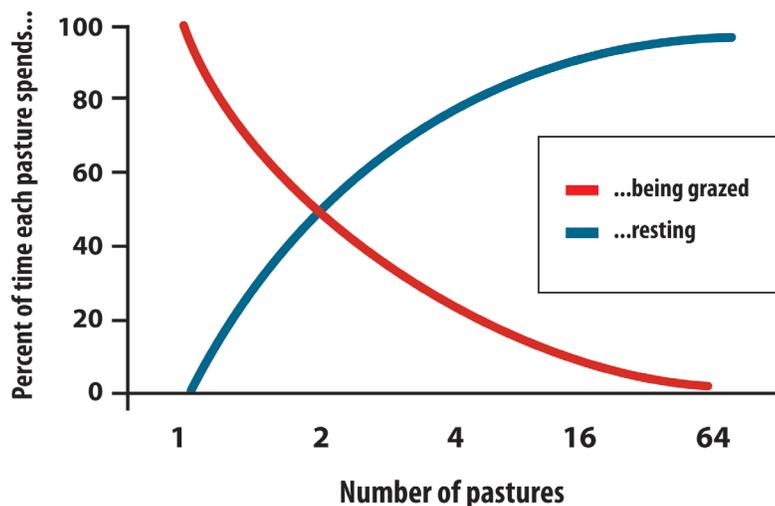


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stock density (live weight per acre). As we increase stock density, the percent of forage consumed (utilization rate) also increases. Since livestock numbers tend to remain fairly constant and are not as easily manipulated, managers tend to concentrate on the amount of area the animals are given and the amount of time they spend there. The amount of time the livestock are not on a given area of land (rest period) is one of the most important benefits of grazing management. The rest period allows plants to mature and replenish root energy reserves.

30 to 60 day rest period, depending on the rate of forage regrowth. Over time, it became obvious that we could extend the grazing season by several months by increasing stock density and utilization rate. Pastures were subdivided even more, which resulted in longer rest periods (up to 90 days). At this level of rest, we have been able to stockpile forage and extend the grazing season to 300 days. Stockpiling forage allowed us to survive the drought of 2011 and 2012, without selling any livestock.

Attempts have been made over the last several years to increase stock density



Our grazing strategy was to match pasture size and cow herd size so that 50 to 60 percent (utilization rate) of the forage would be consumed in 2 to 3 days (grazing period). Over the next several years, pasture size decreased and the number of pastures increased. A grazing system was established for each cow herd consisting of at least 12 pastures. Each pasture would receive a

even more by the use of portable electric fence and moving cattle daily (short duration-high stock density grazing). From our experience, this level of grazing works well in dry conditions with lush forage. As forage matures and/or wet soil conditions exist, high stock density grazing (mob grazing) can be detrimental to pastures and animal performance can suffer. For us, short



duration-high stock density grazing is best used on a limited basis to achieve a specific pasture management goal.

Currently, we are building livestock numbers. Stocking rate was lowered to around 4.5 acres/animal unit in an attempt to match livestock numbers, livestock performance, and forage production without fertilizer inputs. Due to increased pasture productivity, we hope to raise stocking rate to 4 acres/animal unit.

For many years, I have encouraged livestock producers to place as much emphasis on grazing management as they do on livestock production. Most producers in our area stock the land with too many head of cattle and graze their forage to the ground. As a result, they spend too much money on expensive supplemental feeds, fertilizers and herbicides. When drought years occur, they are forced to sell off most, if not all, of the cow herd. I encourage them to subdivide the land and have a stocking rate that will withstand drought conditions. When pastures are allowed to rest, they will become more productive. As the pastures become more productive, so will livestock. Eventually, they will be able to match stocking rate and livestock performance with forage production.