

Drought spurs interest in grass management

Getting to know your pastures better is the critical first step toward more profitable grazing, especially when drought slashes forage supplies, according to a nationally known grazing expert.

Speaking to Kansas farmers and ranchers recently, Jim Gerrish noted that each farm and ranch has unique resources. Matching grazing animals to forage resources is far more cost effective than adapting pastures to fit a certain class of grazing animal and it's particularly critical during a drought, the Idaho-based grazer and consultant said.

Gerrish shared his expertise during two-day workshops in Topeka and Hays produced by the Kansas Rural Center through a grant awarded by the USDA Risk Management Agency.

"Here's what you need to know about your pastures," Gerrish said. "How much forage you can produce, when is that forage available, what is its nutritive value at specific times of the year, and how much does it cost to produce that forage?"

Gerrish, a former University of Missouri beef-forage systems scientist who has authored two books on grazing, emphasized that regular pasture inventories to determine available forage are important, he said, noting that, "Training your eye to figure out how much forage you have is no different than counting bales in the barn."

Monitoring forage supply is especially critical in preparing for drought impact. Gerrish said diversifying pastures and stockpiling forage can dramatically help producers deal with dry periods but he also suggested establishing forage inventory "trigger points" that dictate when it's time to destock. Prioritizing the herd helps ensure that the culling order reflects the goals and needs of the operation.

The goal of any grazing management system, Gerrish said, should be to extend the grazing season and reduce or eliminate the need for hay. Identifying weak links in forage supply throughout the year helps producers reevaluate traditional management practices.

"Normally, we've responded to forage supply issues by feeding hay," he noted. "Today, however, the costs associated with hay have risen five to 10 times faster than the price of cattle. A lot of times, feeding hay is just a bad habit."

Year-round grazing is more than a matter of supply and demand, though, Gerrish explained. "Knowing the nutritional requirements of different classes of cattle — or other grazing species — enables you to match forage resources to animals and determines your production schedule. Cows have their highest protein requirement at peak lactation and highest energy demand from calving to rebreeding. At 90 days of age, pasture becomes a more important nutritional source to calves than their dams' milk. How does that fit with the nutritional content of the pastures you're grazing? Compare when your cows require peak forage with when your forage peaks."

Gerrish pointed out that many operations manage for the cow's diet without keeping the calf's needs in mind. "That's why so many later-born calves are dinks," he said. "Three months after they're born, there's not adequate quantity or quality of forage left for them."

For cow-calf producers, forage quality and availability should determine the production schedule, Gerrish said. “Think in terms of whether your calves are born on green grass or dormant grass,” he said. “February is not spring calving and August is not fall calving. Peak lactation should synch with peak forage supply.”

Cow type also plays an important role, Gerrish told the stockmen and women. The nutritional requirements of high milk producing cows can nearly double from the dry cow phase to peak lactation, he said, and that effectively doubles the stocking rate in terms of forage requirements.

“The worst thing that ever happened to the cow-calf industry was when we started chasing high milk production traits beyond what’s necessary to profitably produce a calf,” Gerrish noted. “You add in today’s tendency toward larger cow size and many ranches have their pastures stocked at two to three times higher than they once did even though cow numbers are actually the same.”

Orchardgrass will work as stockpiled forage, Gerrish said. For warm season perennials, big bluestem is a good choice because it weathers well and maintains a reasonable level of palatability. Bermudagrass can also be utilized, he said, although its protein content drops faster in winter and should probably be considered a dry cow feed.

For legumes, alsike clover and birdsfoot trefoil stockpile well because they retain leaves better than other legumes, Gerrish said. Legumes are also an important component because they provide nitrogen. Graziers can also extend the grazing window with winter annuals. Rye, oats, wheat and triticale can add a month or more of quality grazing. For fall forage production, Gerrish suggests oats. To add grazing time on the spring-side of winter, he recommended rye for its rapid early spring growth. Brassicas such as turnips and radishes should be considered as a transition crop between summer and winter grazing.

Noting that stockpiled winter grazing is frequently of higher quality than producers think, Gerrish cautioned that a pre-established stocking rate quickly eliminates the highest quality forage from the pasture because of selective grazing. “It’s not just about the quality of what they eat on the first day,” he said. “What about the 100th day?”

Strip grazing, Gerrish said, not only extends grazing quality through the winter, it also limits traffic and degradation of the forage. Daily strip grazing moves, he said, can result in twice as much grazing as a set stocking rate and moving cattle every three days, to match the cow’s rate of passage, can be used to eliminate or reduce the need for supplemental protein because the cow gets a protein boost with every move.

Depending on individual situations, producers may also be able to use a leader-follower system, allowing stockers with higher nutritional requirements to have first exposure to forage, followed by dry cows with lower nutrient needs.

Making it all work requires a positive attitude, Gerrish told the workshop attendees, adding that extended grazing can only take place by following a plan. That assessment should also examine personal and business priorities.

“Keep a daily log of what you’re doing for a period of time and determine if what you’re doing is moving you toward your goals,” he advised. “You need to ask yourself, ‘Is this really necessary?’ Those ruminants out there are employees of the ranch and you shouldn’t be doing the jobs that the cows are supposed to do.”

Graziers attending the workshop found plenty of good information to take back home. Council

Grover rancher Norm Triemer said he appreciated Gerrish's knowledge of cattle as well as forages and said he has incorporated many of practices discussed in his operation.

Although most of those in attendance were veteran stockmen and women, Austin Jensen, a student at the Farm and Ranch Management program at Cloud County Community College in Concordia, took advantage of the workshop to further his education. "I'm interested in management intensive grazing and there was a lot of good information presented here," he said. "The techniques for extending the grazing season and how to identify the best grazing options for a particular operation were especially interesting."

Kansas Farmers Union, Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition and Kansas SARE joined KRC as co-sponsors of the event. More information on Gerrish is available at www.americangrazinglands.com.

The Kansas Rural Center is a grassroots organization committed to economically viable, environmentally sound, and socially sustainable rural culture. For more information, contact KRC by calling 785-873-3431 or by visiting the Kansas Rural Center web site, www.kansasruralcenter.org.