Practical Tips for Management Intensive Grazing
The Art of Making it Work for You

Why Practice Management Intensive Grazing?

Ruminant animals have been grazing since the beginning of time. It's natural instinct. It is also natural for the grazing animal to select the most desirable plants and avoid others. By doing this the composition of the diet they consume is higher than the composition of the total forage available. Selective grazing is essential to free roaming animals. It allows them to balance their diet to stay healthy and reproduce. With free roaming animals, once the desirable forage growth had been removed the animals moved on to another area and gave this area a period of rest. This period of non-use or rest was essential to the long term health and survival of the grazinglands.

As populations on earth increased, and man took control of more of the surface of earth, nature's grazing system was interrupted. Man built fences to keep animals in and invaders out. Once the fences went up, animals were no longer free to roam but were confined to a specific area for whatever time period the owner or manager decided. Any type of grazing management must focus on animal requirements, forage available, area and time. How managers decide to use the variable will affect the efficiency of the whole forage system.

There are several types of grazing management available: continuous, switchback, rotational, deferred rotational, short duration, high intensity-low frequency, controlled rotational and what we call management intensive grazing. Continuous grazing is the most widely practiced form by far. It's easy and requires very little thought or management. With continuous grazing one pasture is used throughout the year by a herd of animals. The area is stocked at level to consume the forage produced in that growing season. The pasture may be over or under stocked from year to year due to variations in growth and availability of forage. In continuous grazing, animals can selectively graze the more desirable plants and leave others to mature. As these other plants mature they become less desirable and are repeatedly skipped in preference to new growth coming on plants that have been heavily grazed. As this process continues, the grazed plants become overgrazed and the other areas are undergrazed. The overgrazed areas become weakened and begin to thin and die. Forage plants are replaced by lower quality less desirable species, weeds.

The alternative to continuous grazing is some form of managed grazing.
whereby animals are moved from one pasture to another allowing each pasture to rest before being regrazed. This type of system tries to mimic nature's system. The main reason for implementing any type of grazing management system is to give plants a chance to rest and regrow so that the pasture stays healthy and productive. Management of a grazing system revolves around the rest period. The length of the rest period depends on how fast the plants are recovering and producing new growth and how hard or low the pasture was grazed earlier. If sufficient residual is left, the pasture will recover faster and produce more growth. However, if the pastures are allowed to rest too long, forages will become more mature, less desirable and less nutritious for the grazing animal.

Management intensive grazing is becoming increasingly popular because of the need for graziers to become more competitive in the cost of production. To stay in business, producers must find ways to increase production efficiency to cover the rising costs of land, labor and operating expenses. One way to increase production efficiency is to manage grazing in such a way as to increase the harvesting efficiency of the forages produced. With continuous grazing harvesting efficiency is somewhere between 25 and 35%. This means that 65 to 75% of our production is lost. With management intensive grazing harvesting efficiencies will run from 60 to 75% due to higher stock densities and more even utilization of pastures. The quicker a group of animals can evenly graze an area down to the desired level the higher the harvesting efficiency will be. Conversely, the longer animals stay in a particular area the lower the harvesting efficiency will be. This is due to losses from fouling by manure and urine, trampling and refusal due to lower quality. Again the time factor enters in. While controlling the time of the rest period is crucial for the long term health and survival of the pasture, controlling the time of the grazing period is crucial to efficiency and economic sustainability. Management intensive grazing places emphasis on controlling both time periods with the need of the grazing animal in mind in order to reach an optimum level of economic efficiency and environmental sustainability.

The greater control we have of rest periods, grazing periods and stock density, the more efficient we become. To gain control means reducing the size and time of the grazing period by fencing into several paddocks. The number of paddocks you use will be determined by the level of efficiency you want to achieve, and the time, labor and capital resources you have available to build and manage the system. If time and money are a limiting factor, then start small and build up, increasing the intensity of the system over time. Where to start? To take advantage of grazing management, a minimum of 6 to 8 pastures are needed to gain control over the time factor. The higher number of paddocks you have, if they are stocked properly, the more efficient you will be and the higher the returns to management.

The next few pages are some management tips gained from experience working with several producers over a long period of time. These tips may or may not be research based or proven, but are what producers find works for them. This project was not a research project, but a demonstration and information sharing project centered around producers. We hope you find the following information useful.