

GRAZING METHOD: TOOL OR TOOLBOX?

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This conference makes the 15th consecutive year we have devoted a full day to Grazing. Kentucky is a great state for grazing animals since we have a relatively long pasture season, can grow many forage grasses and legumes and a long tradition of producing quality animal products from quality pasture. We have tremendous potential to improve our overall grazing efficiency and the discussion throughout the day will address many of the practical strategies for improvements.

Before we address the issue of “Grazing Method: Tool or Toolbox?” let’s look more specifically at the grazing animal. The grazing animal is a remarkable forage harvesting machine. In a day a mature cow may consume up to 20 percent of her weight in fresh forage. To do this, she moves slowly over the pasture taking successive bites of forage (30-60 bites per minute) by drawing grass/legumes into the mouth with the tongue and then with the forage firmly held between the tongue and lower incisor teeth pulls and tears it from the plant. Grazing time will vary from 6-11 hours per day, normally in two major periods, just before dark and just after dawn with shorter periods during the day or at night. After a grazing period, the ruminant animal rests and ruminates, regurgitating the forage, chewing, mixing with saliva and swallowing. Rumination times range from 5 to 9 hours each day.

Efficient grazing requires control of the controllable. Since we don’t have a lot of control on how many bites the animal takes or how many hours they graze while having access to pasture, the one important factor we can control is how big of a bite the animal gets and how good the quality is. Bite size is determined by forage availability and quality. To insure optimum intake during grazing, it is important that the animal can have a “big bite” of high quality forage each bite.

Grazing Methods: Over the past two decades we have seen much progress in the overall area of grazing. Grazing methods have received wide publicity leading sometimes to confusion. The official definition of Grazing Method is “a defined procedure or technique of grazing management designed to achieve a specific objective.” The objective of any grazing method should be to manage the pasture and other feed inputs to efficiently produce animal products. Managing forage quantity and quality over the grazing season are of much greater importance than which method is used. Grazing methods are of two general types – continuous and several varieties of intermittent (rotation) grazing that may vary from simple to complex. Unfortunately we in the industry have often confused the issue with the use of terms. It is common to read articles or attend seminars and hear people discuss many grazing methods. Some examples include: continuous, alternate, ration, rotational, intensive, management intensive grazing (MIG), strip, controlled, creep, 3-leaf, mob, mob-tall grass, high

density and ultra-high density grazing. Each of the above has merit and can be used; my problem is when one method is advocated as the “ONLY” or “BEST”. A grazing method is a TOOL for the grazing manager.

Tool or Toolbox: In my toolbox I have many different tools: screwdrivers, wrenches (many sizes), sockets, hammers, chisels, pliers, punches, level, square, files, knives, hatchet, baling wire, string, tape and WD-40. I use all the tools – some more than others, for different jobs. Each tool is for a specific purpose or job.

Grazing methods are the grazing manager’s tool box and each specific method is a tool capable of achieving a goal – purpose – job.

As you approach the grazing season, evaluate your Grazing Toolbox and make wise use of your grazing tools.

Reference

Ray Smith, Garry Lacefield, Roy Burris, David Ditsch, Bob Coleman, Jeff Lehmkuhler and Jimmy Henning. Rotational Grazing. ID-143, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, publication revised October 2011.