

# Grazing Goats and Cattle and other Co-Species Grazing

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Multispecies, co-species, mixed species grazing, it does not really matter what it is called they all revolve around the same premise; grazing more than one species of livestock on a given land area to improve resource use efficiencies.

When grazing one class or type of livestock, the pastures (without good management) over time will move toward one variety of forage which could be much less desirable to that class of animal. Cattle prefer different forages than goats. Goats prefer different forages than horses. Horses prefer different forages than sheep. Sheep prefer different forages than cattle. The point is, even though there is some overlap in forage preference between livestock species the differences are great enough that the potential exists for improved production (both land and animal) by taking advantage of these different taste preferences. Grazing differences not only can be seen by forage type but also heights. Cattle tend to graze close to the ground where as goats would much rather browse several feet above the ground.

Numerous studies over the years have shown that cattle tend to consume a larger percent of grass in their diets. Sheep are split closely between forbs and grass where as goats tend to prefer the browse. Understanding this relationship gives a producer a powerful

planning tool when designing the grazing plans for the operation. Not only does this allow one to choose the forage species to be a part of the operation but also could be used to estimate stocking rates for each grazing species depending on the forage resource on the operation. Multiple trials have shown trends toward increased animal weight gain when two species are grazed together versus the same species grazing alone. This should, in turn lead to increased revenues to the grazing operation by having more weight to sell at the end of the season.

Benefits of multispecies grazing are not just limited to land improvement but this practice can have a benefit to animal health. Parasites are a major management challenge in sheep and goat production in the heart of America. Forage management and good animal husbandry can help a great deal with this issue but so could the addition of cattle to a goat operation. Cattle act like a big vacuum cleaner to goat and sheep parasites as cattle are a dead-end host to the troublesome internal parasites of the small ruminant. And the reverse is true of the internal parasites of cattle as goats and sheep are a dead-end host. There are also positive reports of adding poultry to a grazing program to help with fly population control. The birds like to scratch through the cow "pie" and eat the

horn fly larva that hatch. If there are no larvae, it is hard for the fly population to increase.

So, on the positive side of multispecies grazing we have the potential of increased forage production, improved land management, increased animal weight gain, decreased weed control costs, and improved animal health. One has to admit however, multispecies grazing is just not all positives there are some other considerations that must be made.

Here in the mid west most producers thinking about multispecies grazing are likely to be a cow/calf operation that has some weed issues that need to be resolved. So instead of spending money to kill the weeds of concern why not let something eat them that can be sold at the end of the grazing season. The first issue that may need addressed is fence. The old rundown fence that keeps the cows in most of the time would likely just be laughed at by a goat. Fence to keep them on the property needs to be more substantial than an old cow fence. One barb wire or a couple hot wires (that are not very hot) will not hold a goat. For hot wires to work the spacing must be correct and the voltage must be high. If using old woven wire caution must be made to be sure horned animals cannot get their head through because more often than not they will not be able to get their head back out. Along with fence concerns one needs to consider if the catch pens or working facilities are tight enough to hold in small ruminants.

Predators are another consideration when adding small ruminants to an operation. Things that may have never

bothered the cows could be an issue with goats or sheep. One may have to think about adding guard animals to the operation. This could cause issues with the existing cow herd depending on the guard animal. Some types of fence could help in this situation as well.

General animal husbandry work needs to be thought through before adding another specie. Small ruminants and particularly goats tend to be more labor intensive than a cow herd. Managing parasites and foot problems can be a very time consuming and a labor intensive proposition if not properly prepared. Are there any risks to the added specie from supplements that are available free choice (copper for example in a beef mineral mix)? Are there any health risks that the added specie may bring to the existing herd of grazing animals (johnes passing from goats to cattle)?

As with any management practice there are positives and negatives that each producer must consider. With proper thought and preparation, multispecies grazing could very well be an overall positive to a grazing operation.

### **References**

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