

ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS WITH IMPROVED GRAZING

David Stipes

State Agronomist

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

Lexington, Kentucky

The public is becoming better educated about the environment and will continually question activities that are perceived as being harmful to soil, water, air, plants, people, animals and other concerns. Livestock producers who implement well-planned grazing management systems have an excellent opportunity to compliment both production and natural resource conservation considerations. All segments of the population involved in production agriculture will be held accountable for environmental impacts that result from their operation. A proactive approach is needed by livestock and other agricultural producers to sustain the protection of the environment that is in harmony with a healthy ecosystem. All those involved in production agriculture must consider the effects within the environment that can be influenced by their type of farming operation and individual management strategies.

Grazing systems that are installed according to a site-specific total resource management plan achieve quality results. As an example, livestock producers have traditionally depended on ponds, streams, creeks and rivers to satisfy their livestock water needs. These water sources are both convenient and reliable. However, in recent years, using these sources for livestock water have come under scrutiny when water quality is adversely impacted due to livestock concentrations. Many livestock producers are now installing off-stream water sources. In another example, improved grazing management strategies can be implemented as an alternative to fencing streams in order to achieve adequate resource protection in fields with waterbodies that are sensitive to field runoff. Controlled grazing strategies can thus be implemented to manage livestock grazing in environmentally sensitive areas without causing adverse impacts.

By implementing conservation practices, livestock producers can also benefit wildlife, native plant species and other natural resource concerns. For example a filter strip or a riparian buffer can be maintained along and adjacent to a stream that is down slope from an animal manure handling system. The installation of improved ground covers, livestock watering facilities, fencing of sensitive areas, maintaining animal waste control facilities and other structural and management practices can thus have the net effect of reducing movement of sediment and other pollutants into streams and other water bodies.

In summary, livestock producers and others involved in production agriculture represent an industry that is widely considered as being essential for the quality and quantity of life. Incorporation of grazing land management strategies that consider all types of natural resources is an individual and industry wide responsibility. Coordinated efforts

that promote conservation ethics associated with enhanced environmental quality will help maintain the ability of livestock producers to operate efficiently in rural settings. The ability of agriculture producers to implement management strategies that can protect natural resources simultaneously during production must be explained to the public whenever the opportunity arises!