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Master grazer : educating kentucky livestock producers

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Introduction Kentucky has over 2.51 million head of grazing ruminants consisting of beef and dairy cattle , goats and sheep (USDA , 2007) . The beef and dairy industries represented over \$ 779 million (US dollars) of cash receipts in 2005 . There are over 200 ,000 horses in the state and the sale of horses and stud fees brought in over \$ 1 billion (US dollars) to Kentucky horse owners and breeders in 2006 (USDA , 2007) . Kentucky has over 2.8 million ha of pasture or land grazed by livestock , but much of this landbase is currently underutilized .

Two and three day grazing schools have been popular extension/teaching events in Kentucky since the early 1990's . Sponsored by the University of Kentucky , USDA-NRCS , and other agencies , they focused on pasture and grazing livestock management , both in a classroom setting and with "hands-on" activities in the field . The objective of the Master Grazer program was to deliver the information from the grazing schools in a more convenient evening format and deliver it across the state of Kentucky .

Materials and methods In late 2005 nine groups across the state were selected to host the Master Grazer program in their region in 2006 . Each group had to represent 3 or more local counties and their application included a range of criteria including : reason for hosting the program , number of producers expected , planned follow-up with producers , and incorporation of content into existing extension programming . The Core Grazing Committee for Kentucky then reviewed each application before determining the host groups . Additional groups were added in 2007 and 2008 and the program has been fully funded by the state Agricultural Development Board through 2009 . Groups from within each region were also required to establish at least one demonstration farm to show improved grazing practices being used "on farm" .

The primary speakers for each session included extension specialists from the University of Kentucky , regional and state USDA-NRCS personnel , and local county agents . The program has been delivered through seven afternoon/evening sessions lasting three to four hours . The seven sessions included the following topics : 1-Benefits of improved grazing , economics of grazing , traditional and non-traditional forages ; 2-Plant physiology and response to grazing , establishment , varieties , and weed control ; 3-Livestock nutrition on pasture , shade and water , managed grazing for maximum animal production , and effects of endophyte-infected fescue ; 4-Minerals for grazing livestock , parasite control , and animal disorders ; 5-water systems , fencing options , livestock movement , and pasture renovation ; 6-Farm layout workshop using different production scenarios ; and 7-Farm layout workshop where participants design grazing system modifications for their farms .

Results and discussion The Master Grazer program has been extremely successful over the last three years . To date , producers from over 100 counties (out of 120 in the state) have completed the program . Survey results show that producers are implementing a range of changes to their grazing operations . Whole farm improvements include : increasing number of paddocks , greater reliance on pasture and less on hay and grain feeding , and increasing carrying capacity through improved grazing practices . Agronomically more producers are soil testing , interseeding legumes , adding warm season forages , controlling weeds , and stockpiling surplus pasture for winter grazing . Producers have also improved livestock management by providing greater access to water and shade , better quality minerals , and improved parasite and pest control .

The success of this program has led to the development of an Equine Master Grazer program designed for the unique grazing behavior of horses and the more limited background of many horse owners . The establishment of 19 demonstration farms across the state has provided many practical teaching venues for the Master Grazer program as well as for county and regional extension programs and field days . In 2007 a series of "train the trainer" sessions were held with local county agents and USDA-NRCS personnel so this type of programming can be continued after funding for the Master Grazer program ends .

Reference

USDA , 2007 . Kentucky agricultural statistics and annual report 2005-2006 . *USDA/NAASS/KDA* . Louisville , KY .