Grazing Programs: Environmentally Friendly, Economically Sound and Agronomically Feasible

Sid Brantly
NRCS
Lexington, KY

The environmental soundness of our farms is the greatest, long term asset that farmers have. The topsoil, the trees, the cattle, the grass and crops on your farm are like unto a great financial account...and you are the banker. You make the decisions to: A) Use it all up now, B) Lock it away for someone in the future to make the decisions, or C) Utilize wisely in such a way that it is managed for financial success today, and still builds momentum for your future as well as your descendents.

The environment in the heart of America has been carefully engineered and crafted so that you can be successful in 2006 and beyond. Generally, it takes a partnership between you and the landscape. And, since the environment is shared by many people, there are opportunities to also partner with groups, or even the public at large.

Individual counties, state government conservation divisions, environmental groups, wildlife groups, sometimes even private hunting groups, as well as the national Department of Agriculture sponsor opportunities to share the burden of conservation costs when they exceed what you or I desire to handle alone. Here are a few cost sharing programs that we will examine today:

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)
The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)
Conservation Security Program (CSP)
The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

But first and foremost, do any of these programs have what it takes to help you build or maintain a successful grazing management program in the heart of America? As a successful grazier today, and to manage a sustainable operation for the future, you will benefit from: 1) Competitive Advantage, 2) Marketing Skills, 3) Records, and 4) Low Cost Production.

Competitive Advantage Has Become Important
Commercial beef production systems put you in a “matured market” system. If you don’t have a limited supply, unusual, or niche market to work with, then you need competitive advantage. We accept the price that supply and demand principles offer us. Broader experience in marketing can lead to increased options in selling and buying livestock.

Marketing Skills
Developing marketing skills and management expertise in preconditioning calves (certified), retained ownership, joint ventures, establishing yourself in marketing alliances can give heart of America producers more alternatives for selling grazing land products.

Records
Records allow us to predict where we are going, and map out a possible strategy for change. Livestock management and production records are necessary for a successful grazing program, but have you considered grazing management records?
Figure 1, (first graph above) records a producer’s past forage demand modeled for 42 mature pairs and 2 bulls; coupled with forage from 64 acres orchardgrass/fescue/red clover, 9 acres alfalfa, 6 acres big bluestem, and 6 acres eastern gamagrass.

Figure 2 (second graph above) models the same farm with an intensive grazing system, the same brood herd, and 30 heifers (some held over, some purchased) sold as bred heifers in August and early September.
Grazing management records are important in order to predict the environmental costs and forage production for subsequent years. As such, the Conservation Security Program requires 2 years of grazing management records in order to be enrolled in the program.

4. Low cost production

_We can neither starve cattle fat nor spend ourselves rich._ Thus, low cost production is still the name of the game for the long term. In large part, that amounts to getting more, low-cost, quality forage through our animals, matching their requirements for optimum production. The hands down winner always centers around harvesting forages directly with the grazing animal. When you have to handle it or process it yourself, you lose competitive advantage.

_Before we can graze it, we have to grow it._ Obviously, there’s a plethora of agronomic issues for growing forages (plant adaptability, soil amendment/fertilization needs, nitrogen fixation, anti-quality factors) that must be addressed. But even when these needs are met, most of us do not grow as much forage as we could; and I’m convinced that the primary reason relates to Figure 3 below.

As forages recover from grazing periods, and the leaf surface area increases, the growth rate increases dramatically. If the grazing animals are still in the pasture when the forage plants bolt into fast growth, the animals will re-graze the same plants, thus ending the opportunity for significant growth. Pastures that are continuously grazed cannot be as productive as those with short grazing periods and relatively long recovery periods.

For example, Hoveland, McCan and Hill reported a 37% increase in total calf gain per acre, as well as a 31% decrease in hay requirements, based solely on rotation grazing versus continuous grazing.
Optimum recovery period varies between forage species, but consider Orchardgrass and Tall fescue and Alfalfa to need about 15 days when growing fast, and up to 30 days when growing slowly. Red clover needs 10 days rest in the fast growth stage, and 20 days in the slow growth period, while native warm season grasses benefit most from 30 days rest when growing quickly, and 40 to 45 days rest when growing slowly.

Rotational grazing is simply a method of grazing management to capitalize on the increased production of forages when regular recovery periods are built into your farms grazing program. The grazing system that provides for these increased production levels also assists in building strong, deep, fibrous root systems that provide a level of drought protection for your farm. The overall ecosystem improvement provides for less erosion on the farm, cleaner water, and improved viewshed and environment for the public at large. The programs available to stock farmers in the heart of America are aimed at helping expedite the application of good grazing management.

Let's examine a handful of the programs available throughout the heart of America to see if you can profit from any of them. When investigating programs on this scale, or locally, first determine if the benefits are agronomically feasible for incorporating on your farm. It has to fit your landscape, your production goals, and be sustainable for the foreseeable future. If it meets this feasibility test, then see if the program is financially and economically sound (remember, many practices may have a positive economic output in the long run, but cash flow is the driving force behind most bankruptcies.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) offers contracts with a minimum term that ends one year after the implementation of the last scheduled practice. EQIP can provide cost share or incentive payments to implement conservation practices such as prescribed grazing, water developments, grazing distribution improvement fences.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) provides technical and financial assistance to establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat. WHIP agreements generally last from 5 to 10 years.

The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) offers landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance pastureland while receiving an easement payment or annual rental payments. Offers for enrollment must generally contain at least 40 contiguous acres.

Conservation Security Program (CSP) supports ongoing stewardship of private agricultural lands by providing payments for maintaining and enhancing natural resources. CSP sign-up is offered in select watersheds.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) provides for grazing management with wildlife concern calendar restrictions and a 25% rental payment reduction. Continuous signup CRP is available for grassed waterway installations, riparian buffers, field borders, and filter strips.

Environmental benefits from grazing programs can only be derived when the components of the program are economically sound and agronomically feasible. Each farm is unique in its needs for environmental improvement, but nearly all have a potential to be made better. Plan your grazing program accordingly.