

Pasture Assessments and Planning

Inventory

The first thing a planner has to do to start the conservation planning effort on pastureland involves data gathering. This includes pre-site visit work of a map of the property, soils map, topo map, and aerial photography (the most recent year you can find). Gather your tools – PCS scoresheet and guide, shovel, clipping tools, scale, paper bags and a marker, pencil, camera, notebook. Read the PCS guide. It will tell you how to assess each item correctly and help your in-field assessment to go smoother. You will be able to answer the producer's questions without fumbling around.

What you will need and where it can be found:

Growth Curve for your area: FOTG section 2

Rainfall curve for your area:

Current year's rainfall:

Pasture Condition Score sheet and Guide : FOTG section 4 under 528 Prescribed Grazing practice

Ecological Site Description: EDIT Website

Soil Map: Web Soil Survey

Photography: Google Earth, X: Drive under imagery (using arc map to view it), Conservation Desktop

Standards for Practices: FOTG section 4

Planning Criteria:

Practice Implementation Guide (PIG): Sharepoint under programs tab

EQIP Financial Assistance amounts: AK NRCS webpage under financial assistance

Feed and Forage Balance Spreadsheet: FOTG Section 4 under 528 Prescribed Grazing practice

Production Data Gathering guide: FOTG Section 4 under 528 Prescribed Grazing practice

At the Site visit with the producer:

Identify the fences, water facilities, salt areas, feeding areas. Identify the kind, classes, and numbers of each. If they know approximate weights of animals, that is great info to have also. What is the history of the land? How long a pasture, what fertilizing or grazing has occurred in the recent past? What is their current management. When do they turn the animals out in the pasture and when do they remove them. How many herds do they have. What are the management nuances or specific requirements of the animals (if there are any – like the bull herd can't be in sight of the cow herd during the fall, the one horse is blind and can't tolerate another horse or a change in fences, etc.). Identify what the values of the pasture are to the producer. This is important, because if they are using them for exercise and not for feed, that will factor into their decisions and your acceptable planning options. Identify their long-term goals for the place (10-years or so). How capable and interested are they in managing their herds? Are they feeding in addition to having access to the pastures? How much feed and when? Look at the animals and consider the body condition score sheet. Consider the animals' reproductive stage or stage of growth/ time of year, etc. Their condition will change throughout a year.

Now its time to do the Pasture Condition Score Assessment. If possible, take a sample of the production of a field after it has been rested or before it has been grazed. If the field is uniform, one sample will be ok. If the pasture production is not uniform, take up to three samples. If it is continuously grazed and very short, a production sample will not be useful. Take pictures of the pastures.

Back in the office:

Take your PCS data and find your planning criteria. Determine if you meet or do not meet the criteria. It is related directly to the pasture condition score sheet. This is going to tell you whether or not you have resource concerns that warrant treating with financial assistance.

Now its time to get planning with some options for the producer. Prescribed grazing is going to be key, regardless of any other practice you have, and it must be included in your planning. A fence is nothing without management. Check out your practice selections in the FOTG section 4 and be sure each practice you want to apply is allowable for that land type and be familiar with its requirements. If you are planning on offering financial assistance options, go to the “PIG” on the sharepoint site and check out the requirements for each practice you suggest.

Pull out your growth curve data for your area. Pull out your rainfall curve for your area, and compare it with the current year's rainfall. Consider both when looking at your production data and coming up with an estimate of the production on the pastures. Consider the nutritional needs and demands of the animals – for example, late pregnant and lactating cows will have a high nutritional need as will growing animals.

Complete a feed and forage balance sheet. This is going to tell you what your feed needs are, and what your feed available is for the pastures. Research your animal type if you are not familiar with them. Depending on the animal, intake will fluxuate with climatic seasons, animal stage of growth and stage of reproductive cycle.

To be able to carry out prescribed grazing (assuming they have more need for forage than the pastures can provide) a producer will need to be willing and able to do one of the following: lower their numbers by selling off some of the herd, have another pasture area to move the animals to, or pull the animals off the pastures to feed them in a sacrifice area when the pastures are not ready to be grazed. This is critical, and if they can't do this, they will not be able to carryout prescribed grazing. If they can't carry out prescribed grazing, we can't help them financially with their grazing related practices.

Once you understand when you can apply practices, come up with options of treatment based on your data collection and research. Completing a soil test and applying fertilizer to the pastures the first year is recommended. If we put it in a contract then they have to fertilize accordingly, and that can be very expensive with a meager cost share amount, so be sure and show them the numbers and they can decide if they just want to do that part themselves. This fertilizer shot will give the plants a jump to start their journey toward increased health and productivity that first year.

It is important for the producer to understand that they have to take their actions of moving the herds in and out of the pastures based on the grass height. Their management time will increase. However, with time they will have more production in their pastures and healthier animals, meaning lower feed bills at a minimum. Prescribed grazing is a three-year practice; the changes take time. Consider planning the grazing times initially for when their animals have the highest nutritional needs and expand from there.