

Illinois Grazing Manual Fact Sheet

GRAZING MANAGEMENT

Prescribed Grazing



What

A planned grazing system involves an orderly sequence of grazing and resting grassland.

Why

Livestock are selective about the plants they eat. They tend to repeatedly graze some plants and ignore others. Selective grazing weakens the more desirable plants and allows unwanted plants to thrive and multiply. Nearly all pastures have areas where livestock concentrate, such as around water, bedding grounds, and feed grounds. If the pasture is continuously used, these areas become overused, resulting in pasture deterioration.

Grazing and resting grassland plants in a planned sequence increases the vigor of better plants, giving them a chance to grow and multiply. Therefore, gradually increasing the number of high-quality plants per acre.

Improved grass conditions increase livestock production, improves wildlife habitat, reduces soil erosion, and conserves water. By resting pastures, overused areas are allowed to become productive.

How

Combining livestock from several pastures into one herd, and grazing one pasture at a time, tends to disperse cattle. Grazing distribution is improved in the pastures and provides a rest period for the pastures when the cattle are in a different pasture.

Kinds of Systems

Planned grazing systems vary from unit to unit, depending on the type of livestock, the kind of pasture, and the objectives of the operator. Listed below are some commonly used systems.

Two-pasture, one-herd system – a herd is rotated between two pastures. Each year, pastures are rested during a different part of the growing season to benefit the entire plant community. The system takes advantage of the various growth periods of the more desirable plants.

Three-pasture or four-pasture, one-herd system – are similar to the two-pasture, one herd system, except that the herd is moved through more pastures. Grazing and rest periods vary with three-pasture and four-pasture systems, depending on the producer's objective and the time of year. The length of each grazing period may be as short as 10 days or as long as 120 days. With some three-pasture systems, livestock are moved every four months. With some four-pasture systems, they are moved every three months. With some three-pasture and four-pasture systems, livestock are rotated through each pasture two or more times during the year.

Merrill-four pasture system – three herds of livestock graze three pastures while a fourth pasture is rested. About every four months, one herd is moved to the rested pasture and the pasture they were in is rested. Each pasture is grazed 12 months, then rested four months.

High-intensity, low-frequency system – one herd of livestock grazes eight or more pastures in a planned sequence. Livestock are moved into one pasture and the other pastures are rested. When the forage is grazed to the desired intensity, livestock are moved to the next pasture in the rotation. Livestock typically stay in a pasture 10 to 25 days. The frequent moves allow long rest periods for each pasture. The system greatly improves grassland condition, but individual livestock performance may decline due to the > 10-day grazing sequence.

Short-duration system (Management Intensive Grazing) – similar to the high-intensity, low-frequency system, except the speed of the rotation is adjusted according to the growth rate and the required rest period of the plants. During the peak of the growing season, livestock are moved rapidly - every three to five days - with slower moves when pasture growth rates slow down. A grazing cycle is completed every 25 to 35 days, depending on forage species and time of season. When the system is operated properly, good livestock performance and good grassland improvement are the result.

Cell-grazing system – is a form of short-duration grazing, but usually contains 12 or more pastures in a cell. In cell grazing, the same basic principles of short-duration grazing are used. Layout often uses a design of radiating fences to facilitate the movement of livestock. In these cases, water usually is located in the center of the cell and fences radiate out from the center forming pastures. Because livestock come to the center daily for water and minerals, they should be moved between pastures away from the center to encourage better distribution of grazing. Producers with cell grazing usually use electric fences to reduce fencing costs.

The Best System

The best system, or systems, may depend on present pasture and topography, available water supplies, economics, grass condition, kinds and classes of livestock, long-range goals for grassland improvement, and the time necessary to supervise the operation. The point is, pasture greatly benefits from the graze/rest sequences of properly managed grazing systems.

Where to Get Help

For more information about hay and pasture management, contact your local office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, listed in the telephone directory under “U.S. Government,” or the University of Illinois Extension.



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