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Confessions of a veteran grazing advisor

It's time to recognize that there is no 'prescription' for grazing

By Troy Bishopp

New York dairy farmer Nathan Weaver kidded me earlier this year about something that had appeared in *Graze* (December 2010, "The benefits of better grazing management"). "I hope I didn't upset you with my article on grazing shorter with shorter rest periods," he said.

As Nathan's friend, fellow farmer and his local agency grazing professional, I know the intricacies and diverse mindsets and styles regarding pasture management strategies. Borrowing a quote from South African rancher Ian-Mitchell-Innes, my reaction to his banter was, "Who cares, are ya happy? Are you working toward your goals?"

This is where I'm at after 25 years in the grazing business.

Over the years of service to the sanctity of grassland management, I have been an impressionable youth gaining exposure to a lot of Old World grazing principles, as well as the latest and greatest grazing management styles. I appreciate the mentoring and access to the thought processes of people ranging from Newman Turner and Darrell Emmick to Jim Gerrish and Allan Savory. Each has helped me get closer to my goals. But I'm in agreement with Dr. Ben Bartlett's synopsis: "What's good for you today may not be good for you tomorrow."

For years I was an NRCS-touted "prescribed" beef-stocker grazier, turning in at 10 inches and leaving at two inches and doing everything I could to keep the sward in a vegetative state through grazing and clipping, while worrying what other farmers would say about my messy, seed head-ridden swards.

I was running 15- to 30-day rest periods, although I wasn't always paying attention (what's a few days here and there?). This led to overgrazing. I wasn't always moving cattle every day and I wasn't forward-thinking enough in my planning. I was complacent, and I didn't have a clear set of goals. In retrospect, any goals I did have were mostly financially oriented without regard for the soil.

But I started noticing some things happening. If it was dry, the soil surface didn't have enough litter to hold much rain. Although pretty thick, my pasture mixtures were simplifying (orchardgrass, bluegrass and white clover), with hardly any chance for serious stockpiling. I was growing too much protein and not enough energy.

Since we custom-graze beef animals to finish, we need energy and maximum dry matter intake — protein is not our focus. Our financial profit is tied to the balance of stocking rate and total grazing days — the longer they stay, the more money we make — rather than supplementing with outside feed. By Halloween the entire farm would be nubbed down like the surface of the moon for the sake of not wasting any grass.

It became evident that the "maximizing everything" mindset does not work on our farm because we have found that something — input costs, weight gains, root systems, labor, wildlife capacity — always "gives" when we pursue this goal.

So I've begun another chapter in grazing management. Now I manage for rest periods ranging from 30 to 90 days, with an average of around 45 days depending upon moisture levels. Eighty head of 800-1,000 pound finishing cattle graze half an acre to an acre per day, and are moved one to three times each day depending on our goals for each field. This is not ultra-high stock density, although I can make more of a mob if needed.

Cattle are turned into a paddock when the sward is anywhere from one- to five-feet tall, generally settling in at a 20-inch average for my native sward of more than 30 plant species. Since animal performance needs to be excellent, they are not forced to eat stalks: the residual is trampled into the ground.

The pressure of being labeled a non-scientific grazing zealot has provided a kick in the pants to do something more than just providing feel-good stories and feel-good moments, and start planning better, monitoring better and taking more "before" and "after" pictures of grazing results. I'm more focused on providing actual facts that can be used by other farmers in their decision-making process.

I started using a planned grazing monitoring chart that forced me to write stuff down on a daily basis and do a far better job of planning. I take pictures of manure quality, which is a practical measure of what's going on in the pastures. I count dung beetle holes and golden dung flies, and see how fast the patties dissipate. (I'd like to obtain a small grant to set up a cow pie web cam that would film what happens to a pie starting immediately after it hits the ground.)

When I move the herd in the afternoon, I witness the same pattern of cows biting the top three inches off the tallest plants with their seedheads and ripping the leaves off the sides on the way down as they seek the hiding clovers, plantains and other forbs. These are the places where I take my forage samples and brix readings, and they have consistently shown energy readings at 65 mcal and 12-14 brix, with 20% protein. The cow pies tell me that this is a sweet spot.

We have been seeing consistent gains of more than 2 lbs./day with the daily moves and letting the cattle graze what they want, while trampling the rest. Yes, we are using more land. We used to run about an animal per acre; now it's closer to one animal per 1.5 to 2 acres. However, we now start grazing two weeks earlier in the spring and go two months longer in the fall, grazing nine months in central New York. That's 80 more grazing days at my custom charge of 75 cents/head/day.

We now buy no seed or fertilizers; just some hay. We encourage and rely on our native seed bank and its associated trample to build organic matter and sequester moisture.

The "waste" factor with trampling seems to be everyone's bone of contention, especially for dairymen. "Tall"- and mob-grazing folks talk a lot about the degree of trample and how this residual affects everything in the sward. This dynamic needs serious research. Does the litter hinder or help regrowth? I think that in dry and slow-growth periods, litter definitely helps. But for wet years I have questions.

Overall, though, it appears that the dynamic of allowing all plants in a sward to express themselves once a year leads to better diversity and stronger roots compared to my previous management.

I have started a biological monitoring program adapted from Allan Savory (founder of Holistic Management) that involves establishing a baseline for the land and doing annual updates to determine progress toward our goals. This aids in planning for what each field needs on the biological/animal impact scale. With my taller grazing, I have seen a marked increase in earthworm populations, improved plant diversity and less bare ground.

This annual exercise of throwing darts and crawling on my hands and knees through the sward has heightened my management skills and gotten me excited about farming again, although it seems I'm starting over in what I know and appreciate.

Our new holistic goal drives the land management system. We want a stress-free life. We want our topsoil covered by diverse pastures harvested by animals, thus recycling solar energy and activating biological life to provide a sustainable profit. We want to regenerate our community with local food. We want to create a savannah for wildlife. We want to create a place for the next generation to thrive.

Perhaps your goals are similar, but your methods for reaching them are different. I am sorry for adopting a "who cares" attitude, but after 25 years I'm convinced everyone is right about grazing if it meets their goals of regenerating a landscape and a community by creating what you want for your family, the environment and your bank account.

To access a northeast grazing or biological monitoring chart, go to: www. cnyrc&d.org