

Improve Your Grazing Management Skills

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Planning out your grazing season in advance by using a daily grazing chart is an approach that is gaining in popularity among serious grazing managers and conservation professionals. This tool can help you keep track of where you were, where you are and where you are going throughout the grazing season.

Why is planning ahead so important? As Troy Bishopp puts it, "I've never had a farmer complain about having too much feed!" With over 40 farmers in attendance, Troy Bishopp lead a discussion on using a grazing chart to plan out your upcoming grazing season. Also known as the "Grass Whisperer," Troy has been actively grazing for the past 27 years. He gains a great deal of hands on experience as he manages his family farm in Deansboro, N.Y., contract grazing organic dairy heifers while also working for the Madison County Soil and Water Conservation District. The grazing charts that his team created were part of a project funded through a North East Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (NESARE) PDP grant to help grazing professionals and farmers manage farms more holistically.



This type of management can be applied to any species of livestock that you plan to graze. For the class, Black Queen Angus, managed by Morgan Hartman was our sample farm. Using his farm's information we were able to work through the process of planning a grazing season. Morgan Hartman is a Rensselaer County farmer who raises beef completely on grass. At Morgan's farm, Black Queen Angus (<http://blackqueenangus.com/>), he has been very successful using holistic management.

Don't let the term holistic scare you! It only means that we are taking the entire farm and your goals into consideration. Have you set goals for your farm and family (or community)? These two areas should not be considered separately from one another, but instead should be planned and thought about together. Using the chart, you would be able to plan your rotational grazing so you do not find it as difficult to get away from the farm to go to the fair, a wedding, or a take vacation (yes, I said vacation!). Maybe your grazing goals include the environment around you (such as providing wildlife habitats or being aware and considerate of bird fledging dates) or just having some additional family time.

Grazing charts that we used in class are large pieces of paper, printed with dates, spaces to track your yields, paddock numbers or names, and paddock sizes. As you track your season or plan ahead, you are able to utilize an easy to understand visual aid. Getting started with the grazing chart and planning your season is simple. Start by writing down everything that happens with your pastures, weather, and animals. You can write this down on a calendar, in a diary, or on the chart itself. Include things like amount of rainfall, your frost dates, and temperatures. Invest in a simple rain gauge, get soil maps (these can be obtained from your local Soil and Water Conservation District office or on Web Soil Survey

which can be found at <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/HomePage.htm>), and aerial maps of your farm (also from your local Soil and Water Conservation District or online sources such as www.google.com or www.bing.com).

Using these tools, you can look at what your soil is capable of producing and use the maps to help define where your pastures will be. Once you have a better idea of what you could produce on your farm's soils and in your situation, compare that to what demand your livestock are presenting you with. An easy to use worksheet is available at the following link to help you through this process (http://www.virtualgrange.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Grazing-planning-worksheet-draft_TROY-BISHOPP.pdf).

This worksheet is known as a Prescribed Grazing Management Planning Worksheet and on this worksheet you will find straight forward ways to calculate the forage demand, the forage supply, help in determining the paddock size and number needed, and the total number of acres required. Knowing these values will help you make decisions based on facts, rather than guesses.

Once you have completed the Prescribed Grazing Management Worksheet and know how many paddocks you need, sizes of paddocks, rest periods, and your goals, you can begin planning your season on your grazing chart. For example, if you know you and your children go to the local fair every year, make sure you plan to have your animals in an area that will be convenient for you during that time. To plan for a special event, work backwards from it, taking into account the required rest periods, rotations, etc. Charts are typically 28" x 32" as this fits well on barn doors, but they can be printed in different sizes to suit your needs. Spaces are provided to write in paddock names or numbers, how long the animals stayed in the paddock (or how long you plan for them to stay), and any additional notes. Some of the key questions discussed at the meeting included:

- What paddocks do you want to winter on?
- Are there any fields that need renovation?
- What is your typical grazing start date?
- Will you clip your pastures?
- When do you supplement when things don't go as planned?
- When are you birthing or breeding (and on what fields)?
- What are the daily dry matter requirements?



These questions will be answered differently from farm to farm, each needing to find its own answer that will help to make it the most successful. As Troy said, “I don’t do hopeful grazing anymore. I don’t hope I will make more money. I have faith that when I do things right, I will prosper.” Our sample farm, Black Queen Angus, has some additional acreage for the number of animals they planned to graze.

This allows them resiliency in tough seasons and extended grazing at both ends of the year. Maybe your farm does not have additional acreage, but a plan would help alert you to when it would be time to purchase additional feed or sell animals. Having a plan is especially important for those farms that may not have extra land resources available to them. Planning ahead does take time and effort, but is vital to a successful operation. Even if you decide that following all of these steps is more than you are willing to do, try to implement parts that you think will fit your operation best.

Maybe you are new to your farm or grazing, in that case try just recording what happens this year to help you learn about your farm. Try completing the Prescribed Grazing Management Worksheet to see how the number of animals you raise compares to the acres of pasture you work with. Also, don’t be afraid to adjust your plans to fit the season, your animals, or your goals.

To help farmers learn about the use of this tool and planning method, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer County and the Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Albany, Columbia, Greene, Montgomery, Rensselaer, Schenectady and Washington Counties, NESARE, The Upper Susquehanna Coalition, as well as the Central New York and Hudson Mohawk Resource Conservation and Development Councils teamed up to provide an intensive training at the Brunswick Community Center. Rensselaer County Cornell Cooperative Extension will provide grazing charts on request for a small fee. If I can answer any of your questions or provide you with a grazing chart, I can be reached at (518) 272-4210 or arp253@cornell.edu.