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Greener Pastures - Is Managed Grazing Right for Your Operation?

Michigan State University

Michigan State University Extension

The Michigan Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative

Issued July 2002

2 pages

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# Looking for more information?



As more farmers gain experience with managed grazing, more information is available to those looking to get started.

Staff with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), MSU Extension and Conservation Districts can help with planning and specific issues such as watering systems, fencing and forages.

A good guide to getting started is Extension Bulletin E-2288, *Controlled Grazing: Balancing Forages, Livestock & Management*. In addition, you can learn more about what forages might be best for your grazing operation in Extension Bulletin E-2787, *Perennial Legume and Grass Forage Variety Selection for Michigan*. These bulletins are available from your county Extension office or from the MSU Bulletin Office, 10-B Agriculture Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824-1039. Phone: 517-355-0240.

The best information might be in your own backyard. Grazing networks have formed in many areas of the state with the purpose of sharing information and helping farmers help one another. Contact your county Extension, NRCS or Conservation District office or a member of the Michigan Hay and Grazing Council for information about grazing networks in your area.

## Greener Pastures

Is managed grazing right for your operation?



Development of this publication was made possible through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the USDA NRCS in Wisconsin. Copies are available from NRCS offices, MSU county Extension offices or from the MSU Bulletin Office (above).

July 2002

Funding:

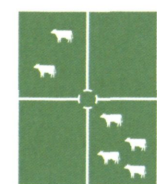


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# Greener Pastures



Is managed grazing right for your operation?

by the Michigan Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative



Extension Bulletin E-2785 • July 2002

# Why use managed grazing?



Farmers using managed grazing often describe it in terms such as “less stressful” or “family friendly.” Practical benefits come along with the lifestyle improvements.

**Economic benefits.** Most farmers who try managed grazing do so because it can save them money. Both start-up and maintenance costs are less than for green chopping. If you have already invested in a confinement feeding system, maintenance costs are reduced because the system is used only during the cold months. Once in operation, grazing reduces the costs of equipment, fuel, chemicals and labor. Managed grazing can also greatly increase the amount of forage harvested compared to continuous grazing.

**Time savings.** Some farmers are reluctant to try managed grazing because of the time it takes to move livestock. However, most farmers find that moving livestock is less time consuming than cutting, hauling and feeding greenchop. Farmers with large cattle herds find that moving 250 to 500 head at a time takes no longer than moving 50 head.

**Environmental benefits.** Compared to cropland, well-managed pastures decrease soil erosion, require only minimal fertilizer and pesticides, and greatly reduce the threat of barnyard runoff during the grazing months. Grazing can help reduce high soil phosphorus levels from excessive manure and fertilizer applications. Cropland converted to well-managed pasture can also help reverse the declining populations of grassland birds such as bobolinks, meadowlarks and upland sandpipers, and provide good nesting habitat for game birds such as pheasants, wild turkeys and quail.



*Managed grazing goes by many names... rotational grazing, grass-based farming, management intensive grazing, prescribed grazing. But all the terms mean basically the same thing. Pasture is divided into smaller areas or “paddocks,” often using portable fencing. One paddock is grazed for a time, while the remaining paddocks rest and recover.*





# Thinking about adopting a managed grazing system?

Ask yourself some basic questions about your operation and your goals.



To stay profitable in today's farm economy, many small-to-medium dairy operations are considering one of two changes – either modernizing and expanding, or a change to a managed grazing system. To make

this decision you'll have to examine your long-term goals for the farm and the lifestyle you and your family want to live.

Farmers experienced with "grass farming" will tell you that 90 percent of the job is thinking, planning, and experimenting. Before getting started, you'll need to ask and answer some questions about your operation and your goals.



YES NO

- Do you enjoy working with livestock more than operating farm machinery?**  
Farm machinery is used less in a managed grazing system compared to a conventional livestock feeding operation where crops are grown and brought to the animal.
- Do you prefer raising cattle to growing row crops?**  
Graziers need to know and understand livestock and forage crops to succeed, with little reliance on corn and soybeans.
- Are you interested in keeping labor cost low and avoiding management of a large labor force?**  
Managed grazing systems can reduce labor cost compared to confined livestock facilities where animals need to be fed, cleaned, and doctored often to maintain animal health.
- Do you want your family to spend more time together, either tending livestock or simply having time off?**  
On many confined livestock farms, the jobs are delegated to different workers. One person might be out on the machinery while someone else is in the barn milking, and another feeds calves. All work long hours unless labor is abundant. With managed grazing, the family tends to spend more time planning and managing changes rather than operating and maintaining equipment, keeping up with feeding and tending to the livestock.
- Are you interested in having more time off or more time to spend in endeavors other than raising livestock?**  
Some people who adopt managed grazing do their own direct marketing of their product. Others use more time for recreation and leisure, while a significant number work off farm. Managed grazing is a more flexible farming system and gives the farm family more income-generating options.

YES NO

- Are you willing to reconsider how you assess profits and overall farm economics?**  
Those who adopt managed grazing are less likely to use production per livestock unit as the sole indicator of financial success. Rather than looking at production per cow, they are more likely to use net profit (per cow, acre, pound of milk or beef produced).
- Do you feel that your "conservation ethic" is particularly strong?**  
Farmers who have adopted managed grazing systems typically express significant concerns about soil erosion and dependence on purchased chemical inputs.
- Would managed grazing help solve conservation problems on your farm?**  
Many farms have problem areas such as over-grazed pasture, creek-bottom pasture trampled by livestock, barnyard runoff, high soil phosphorus, or cropland erosion. Managed grazing may be a solution to those problems.
- Are you entering the livestock business and need to keep your financial risk somewhat low?**  
By adopting a grazing system your biggest investment is land and cattle. Those are appreciable assets and give you some flexibility later on to make changes without a high depreciation cost.
- Are you in a stable financial condition with relatively low debt?**  
In the past, people who have attempted to pay off large equipment costs with managed grazing have found it more difficult than those with a low equipment debt. The cash flow requirement of a highly leveraged operation is greater than what managed grazing can return in receipts and still have enough left for a decent profit.



Beyond answering the "big picture" questions, you'll also need to analyze specific, practical issues about grazing on your farm. These include the availability of water or ways to get water to each pasture, the type and cost of fencing you'll need, and the forages best suited for your livestock and your soils.

But most of all, you'll need to ask yourself, "Am I willing to experiment with new approaches to farming?" Planning will help get you started with managed grazing, but learning on the job is the biggest part of the change. Here's what some experienced graziers have to say about the change:

"Most of the things I've learned have been trial and error. I've found that just because something works on one farm doesn't mean it will work on every farm."

"Everyone's herd is a little different, so I'd suggest doing this kind of experiment on your own farm. University research studies aren't farm-specific. The best thing to do is experiment on your farm and take a chance on losing a little milk."



"With grazing, the type of work changes dramatically and is much more enjoyable."

"The biggest benefit of grazing is lower feed costs and less machinery investment and repair. But this benefit takes time because of the transition period when you're running two farming systems."