

Planned Grazing Benefits

by Greg Judy

TECHNIQUE

Greg Judy manages a grazing operation near Clark, Missouri.

'Management Intensive Grazing' in concert with 'Planned Grazing' are the only tools we use to build our grass-to-beef operation, which consists of 10 leased farms and 3 owned farms. We use no purchased fertilizer, no seed, no herbicides, no grain, no tractor, and no hay is baled off the farms—the cattle do everything for us. For improving your pasture forages, there is no better equipment made than a cow. Our stocking density ranges from 150,000 to 450,000 lbs per acre (150 – 400 cows per acre). To achieve this kind of stocking density you must move the cattle daily to a fresh strip of fully rested, fully regrown forage.

For years, we ran a stock density of 16 to 20 head per acre with a two-day graze period. We never could control our weeds and always had rank uneaten grass when we moved them. We were on a 4 – 5 week rest cycle before that pasture was grazed again. As the grazing season progressed, the cattle would always leave the rank grass and weeds.

With our present heavy stocking density, everything is eaten or tromped flat on the ground. Our present rest period is 60 – 90 days; everything is new green growth and the cattle love it. We have deeper grass roots than before, we catch nearly every drop of rain, manure distribution is much better, the soil stays cooler, and droughts are no longer a problem, along with many more benefits.

In addition, our stocking rate *for the season* has increased dramatically. It used to take 5 acres to run an animal unit for the season. Now we can run an animal unit on 1.5 acres. Our neighbors utilizing conventional management have stocking rates of 5 – 6 acres to support an animal unit, and their land continues to deteriorate.

The new system most definitely produces more forage. We are grazing more cattle on all farms and yet we have more grass than previously under the lighter stocked rotation. The diversity of grasses has increased along with a huge decrease in weeds. One of the many problems with light stocking rates is that it benefits weed encroachment. Cattle refuse to eat them, so weeds encroached more each year. With heavy stocking rates, all species are eaten or trampled equally. We are building soil now, before we were not. The grass is more robust; it grows back with very little moisture due to the long-rested, fully regrown roots.

Planned grazing is more profitable. We have more calves to sell off of the same acres of grass, or in the custom-grazing scenario we can graze more cattle which equates to more cash coming in from monthly invoices on the same amount of ground. I don't know how far we can push the numbers, since this is our first year with the heavy stocking rates. In terms of labor, we are moving more cattle with one move—rather than having them spread over 3 farms, they are stocked heavily on one farm (fewer moves, less gas, less time). It costs much less to produce a pound of beef under the intensive system.

The land is coming alive in the terms of more earthworms, more microbial activity, more dung beetles recycling the manure, much better animal impact on the land, more diversity of grasses, fewer weedy species, and cows that are much more docile due to daily moves. We have the ability to weather droughts much better (longer rest periods), eliminating the need for destocking.

While the initial change to rotational grazing began improving our pastures immediately, the lat-

est change to heavier stocking rates appears to be producing even more dramatic benefits. This is the first year we have taken stockers in for custom grazing in July and August (our hottest months), while our neighbors were feeding hay. We had plenty of grass even in a severe drought. We have so much more control of our production system now: We are in the driver's seat! I am loving it—I have never had more fun grazing than this summer, even with the drought. This system has taught me to think about everything that I do and observe more closely what nature is telling me about my management decisions.

The truly neat thing about this whole process is that it's sustainable, and the cattle do all the hard work. All you need to invest in is some 3:1-gated poly-wire reels and white tread-in posts. There is not a more powerful tool on the face of the earth than a mob of cows moved daily across your farm. You show me another tool that fertilizes, mows, stimulates forage growth, and reproduces, and I will buy it! We would be out of the grazing business today if we had not changed our old grazing methods and mindset. Cattle can heal the soil, we just have to learn to graze correctly.

Greg Judy is the author of the book No Risk Ranching, 2002, Green Park Press. 🌿



Greg Judy's cattle at his heavy stocking rate.

Photo by Greg Judy