

## **Management Intensive Grazing And How We Look at Costs**

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We have a family owned farm cooperation consisting of my father and one employee. Our operation is 1900 acres in size with 650 acres in corn, 500 acres in soybeans, 160 acres in hay, and 500 acres in pasture in which we practice management intensive grazing. We have 200 beef cows and 300 head finishing feedlot.

Our pasture management system has been developed to incorporate management intensive grazing. We have 200 beef cows on 500 acres of pasture. We started using this practice in 1989 and it has evolved into an integral part of our operation. Today, we have 12 major paddocks in which we subdivide into 50 smaller paddocks. Our grazing system consists of about 4 to 5 cycles through the paddocks. Our first cycle will start about April 25th when the grass is 5 to 7 inches tall. In early spring with rapid grass growth, we graze about 6 acres per 200 head of cow/calf pairs per day, just trimming the top of the grass. The rest period will only be about 3 weeks, so we can get back in quickly and top the grass off again.

The second cycle through the paddock system, we are able to slow the pace down a little. We graze about 4 acres per day using 200 cow/calf pairs. The grass is in the reproductive (seed setting) stage of growth. We try to graze this stage a little harder to keep our grass in a more vegetative stage. If the grass gets away from us and goes to seed, we will try to clip it. After we clip, the grass will usually stay in the vegetative stage the rest of the summer. This second rest period will last about 4 weeks. The cows eat most of the broadleaf weeds, if any. The bull thistles will have to be clipped once or twice a year and the Canadian thistles will be clipped and spot sprayed. The grazing cycle is very similar to mowing hay. We mow it and bale it and give the hay field a rest for 30 days before we mow again.

On the third cycle through the paddocks, we graze at about 4 to 5 acres per day. The regrowth starts to slow down during this time of year with higher temperatures and less rainfall. The rest period may range from 4 to 6 weeks depending on weather. August is usually a month when we have to use supplemental feed for the cows. The fourth cycle is the September/October time frame. Once we get through this cycle we start looking at grazing cornstalks. We have not been able to do any stockpiling of grass in our grazing program.

Management intensive grazing has given us four major benefits for our farm. As I walk across our pastures, the rest period in which we give our pastures has given new life to our forage diversification. I'm continuously amazed at new species of grass and legumes growing, which include, white clover, red clover, timothy, orchardgrass and birdsfoot trefoil.

The body condition of our cows has also improved. We rotate our cows on a daily basis to a fresh paddock. This greatly improves the palatability of the grass. Even the calves like to graze fresh vegetative grass, so we have been able to eliminate creep feeding.

The third major benefit on management intensive grazing that I stumbled upon after five years of grazing was streambank stabilization. We have five acres of a creek bottom pasture that was continuously grazed and showing wear and tear on the banks. Downstream, I was using management intensive grazing and only grazing the streambanks one day per month. On those streambanks we had massive amounts of vegetation.

What this told me was the management intensive grazing will work to improve pasture and riparian areas--but there is a four to five year transition to get there.

The other benefit that we realized is harder to define. Call it what you want--quality of life, farmer attitude, or peace of mind. I thoroughly enjoy going out on my four-wheel ATV and moving the cows to the next paddock. I have two daughters, and I want to do things with them that don't require big machinery or pesticides. Management intensive grazing allows me to do that. We go out, and it takes about 15-20 minutes to move the cows. It is our goal to try to solve biological problems with biological solutions. It takes time, patience and the willingness to learn and observe nature. But it results in a friendlier place to raise my family-- environmentally, emotionally, and economically.