

Grazing Bites

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We live in a fast paced world. I remember quite well having to read published research “papers,” magazine articles, and books to learn about the latest innovations. There was no internet, email, smart phones, or electronic information sources except local television and radio. My mother often spoke about time going faster as she got older. I think the addition of electronics has accelerated it even faster while at the same time making the world smaller and somehow warping the measure of time itself. Those statements are sounding a bit deep for an article on grazing...but hopefully they will help promote pondering for a moment the question, “Are we making an impact?”

It seems not so long ago, during post-harvest to early spring, there was time where things slowed down a bit, and there was time for some deep cleaning of files and drawers, enjoying a little down time, actually enjoying time reading, and planning for the upcoming season. I now find myself scrambling and searching for that time with it quite often being accomplished at the cost of some sleep.

I would encourage you to stop and think for a moment about changes that have been made to your operation. What has improved from decade to decade? Have the livestock you raised changed in a positive way? Are the forages of higher quality and production? Are they more efficient than what was on the farm 20, 30 or 50 years ago? Is the operation more efficient?

Especially pre WWII, most grazing types of livestock were forage based, and only supplemented as needed. Pre and post the Depression, beef was a luxury. In fact, my mother’s family wouldn’t even consider eating one of the prized beef animals, even to the disappointment of my grandmother who tired of pork and chicken. Little or no beef was consumed until the late 40’s when freezer space was rented at the locker in town. Today, we could have a steak on a whim by going to the basement freezer or the refrigerator. Have our living standards changed?

I believe that with the advances in synthetic fertilizers and herbicides post WWII along with improved technology and equipment, we suddenly found we could raise a lot of cheap corn. Scholars promoted grain fed operations because you could raise and maintain more animals than what could be maintained on primarily forages, and we shifted from grazing to carrying the feed to the cows. We transformed the cows from forage consumers to corn burners. As operating costs increased, including high commodity prices, producers got a lot more interested in getting ruminant animals back out on grass. Can we carry as many animals as we did when we were carrying quite a bit to them? No, not likely, especially when the amount of land we have committed to forages has also probably declined during the same timeframe.

Of course, with good fertility, good management, adequate cover and rest, provided by rotating the animals in such a way that we can capture as much solar energy as possible. This enables maximum growth and yield potential creating more carrying capacity or better yet, potential grazing days than a low fertility, unmanaged system. These practices should also accomplish better nutritional forage to grow milk and meat.

So, have we changed with the times? If we haven't, then how efficient is our operation? After the big commodity bubble, we are now seeing some marginal cropland that used to be pasture or hay land going back to forage. Higher cattle prices have made beef somewhat of a luxury again and it may stay that way until cattle numbers rebound.

Perhaps it is time for us to consider converting marginal cropland acreage back to forage for grazing or hay and matching the livestock numbers more to the land available. There has been a lot of land that shifted to corn or soybean production in the last five years that would have been better off left in grass. The justification for removing trees and fencerows was stronger with higher commodity prices. I know some wish they had not been quite so aggressive. We lost a lot of valuable cows in the process, plus we degraded and opened some land up to soil erosion and lost a lot of biodiversity.

There is a lot of talk and discussion about grass-fed animals today. I'm not even going to try to list the possible nutritional benefits. More research is actually needed to substantiate some of the promoted benefits. Some are not quite as distinct as we would think, especially if in the same grade, but there is still some. What does stand out clearly as a difference is grass-based operations are more environmentally friendly, economically sound and much more sustainable.

What does it boil down to? Grazing type livestock have four feet which are four feet drive, a built-in harvester and a fertilizer spreader all working simultaneously. They are more efficient in harvesting their own meal than anything we can harvest and carry to them.

What do we need to change in our operation right now to make life a little easier and perhaps allow us a little time to pick up that book that we laid down and relax a bit while increasing our profitability?

Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

Northern Indiana Conference is **this week** February 6-7 - For more information call the LaGrange County Soil and Water District at 260-463-3166.



Indiana Forage Council Annual Meeting & Seminar is February 19, 2015 at Clifty Falls State Park Inn, Hoffman Room, Madison, IN. Please RSVP by February 13 to Lisa Green, lgreen06@purdue.edu or 765-494-4783 (See attachment for more information)

Southern Indiana Grazing Conference is March 4, 2015 and will be held at an excellent new location, the WestGate Academy near Crane, Indiana. For more information go to <http://www.daviesscoswcd.org/index.php/sigc> or call 812-254-4780 Ext 3.



More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/in/technical/landuse/pasture/>