

The Power of a Pasture Makeover

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I love watching home makeover shows on TV. I am always amazed at how they can take a rundown house and turn it into a beautiful space. And, one of the best design tricks I've learned is that "bigger isn't always better." With planning, the TV designers can turn one large vast space into several small, more functional spaces.

It's a concept range managers use as well with rotational grazing. Let's take a closer look at the benefits of using a rotational grazing system for improved range management – and then I will share how we are applying rotational grazing to our family operation near Sturgis SD.

The land that surrounds our farmstead includes two large pastures – and like many of those houses I see on TV – our pastures are getting a little rundown because of continuous grazing in the summer and very little time for plants to regrow.

My family has been working with our local Natural Resources Conservation Service professionals and are developing a plan that will turn those 2 pastures into 5 smaller, but more functional, pastures for rotational grazing. Before I show you our plan, I'd like to first provide a definition for rotational grazing and highlight the benefits – to the land, to the livestock, to wildlife, and even to people – from a rotational grazing system.

First, a definition: The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines rotational grazing as: "the shifting of livestock to different units of a pasture or range in regular sequence to permit the recovery and growth of the pasture plants after grazing."

This definition points out the primary benefit of a rotational grazing system – which is the opportunity to let pastures rest and plants regrow. For example, on our South Dakota operation, with five pastures, we can rotate cattle and graze through all five areas before even thinking about coming back and regrazing the first pasture. If we spend 7 to 14 days in each small pasture, that will allow about 30 to 60 days of rest for the grasses before they are regrazed. That's important for keeping the soil and plants on the land healthy.

A second benefit from multiple pastures and rotational grazing is flexibility for season of use. Right now, our family tends to start grazing cattle in the same pasture every spring, which can really be hard on plants. But with five pastures in the future, we can start grazing in a different pasture every year for five years. This gives different plants opportunities to grow at different times of the year.

A third benefit of having cattle in a smaller pasture, means that cattle will be more evenly distributed across the small space and their manure will be better distributed across the pasture, acting as a fertilizer adding nutrients to the soil.

Additionally, we hope to graze our pastures longer into the fall with this system, because with the rest and regrowth, we should have more forage grown to return to and graze. With our present grazing, we are typically out of pasture by early September. Implementing a rotational grazing system may extend forage viability into October, depending on the growing conditions annually.

Those all add up to some big benefits to the land – which over time can mean healthier pastures in the form of better yields, higher quality forage, and even less weed and erosion issues.

But, better pastures also benefit the livestock. Animals may have better gains and less health issues. Wildlife also benefit from better habitat and forage quality – and may have better reproduction success when some areas are being rested.

Finally, rotational grazing offers benefits to people. With more productive pastures, owners may be able to run more cattle, and may enjoy a better economic return on the livestock they produce.

With that, are you ready to learn specifically what our pasture makeover will look like?

Our current two pastures include one smaller pasture of about 50 acres, which includes a small creek and a dugout. This pasture is primarily native grasses and forbs. The second pasture is nearly 90 acres of introduced grasses like smooth brome and crested wheatgrass. We will sometimes hay this area depending on how much forage is produced. Currently there is no water source on this area, so, when it is being grazed, we have to leave access to the dugout – and the first pasture.

With the five pasture plan we've developed, we create three pastures of about 30 acres each on the 90 acres, and 2 pastures of about 25 acres each on the 50 acres of native grass. We also plan to add 3 pipeline water developments, so that each of the pastures have access to fresh water.

Our goal is to run summer yearlings – either replacement heifers or steers from about May 15 through October or November, depending on the amount of rainfall any given year. With this system, NRCS has calculated we could stock about 30 head of yearlings – possibly more as our pasture plants improve.

To implement this system, we will incur some costs for fencing and the water development. And, moving cattle more frequently will require some extra labor and

management. But we believe the benefits and management flexibility we will gain make it worth the investment. We can graze all areas, or we could still hay the three small pastures if we want, and we could use hayed areas for aftermath grazing. We also hope to see more native plants return to our pastures with the improved grazing management.

Another thing we are excited about with this plan is that we have chosen to make one entire pasture encompass the small creek and oak trees that run through the property. We will still plan to graze that pasture, but we hope to keep cattle out of there the majority of the time, in hopes of seeing a new generation of oak trees get established. Reducing the continuous grazing on this riparian area should also foster better habitat for birds and wildlife, and protect the water quality of the creek.

We have a lot of work ahead of us, but in the long run, we believe a pasture makeover can create a lot of new possibilities for better grazing management.

In conclusion, one or two big pastures may not be the best for the plants or the livestock. Rotational grazing of several smaller pastures offers many benefits, including:

- More opportunities to let pastures rest and regrow
- Flexibility for season of use.
- Better grazing distribution – and distribution of manure nutrients across pastures.
- Opportunities for extending the grazing season.
- Rotational grazing may also boost forage quality – which may mean better livestock gains and profits. And, better habitat can benefit wildlife, and water quality.

I look forward to putting this management plan into practice and seeing the impact on our land, our livestock and our lives.

References

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