

Nebraska Range Judging

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Have you ever taken the time to go outdoors and just sit there and watch nature do its work? That can go from in the forest looking at trees, to sitting by the ocean, or for somebody like me, sitting in a pasture on the plains watching the sun set. One of the things I see when I sit out there in the pasture is rangeland. For all the people in the Great Plains region, they know that rangeland is a big part of their lives. Therefore, that is what I want to talk about today - how and what range judging is like in Nebraska.

One of the biggest things we have in Nebraska is rangeland. With this rangeland a lot comes into play. For a rancher, he needs to know how many cattle he can have on a pasture and how long he could have those cattle on there. I am here to educate you about the practices of what happens with range judging in Nebraska.

The first thing that you really need to know about the rangeland is what kind of plants are out there. To me, I feel plants are the biggest factor when you are range judging. They are used in every section. After you learn what plants you have in pasture, that knowledge can be helpful in calculating how much grazing can occur. On top of that, you need to know what season your plants grow in so you don't kill the plants out there with grazing in the wrong time-frame. One of the most effective ways to help grazing is to set up a rotation plan. Having a grazing rotation system makes it better for your pastures so they have time to rest and grow even better in the coming years.

When you look out at a pasture, what do you see? Just a bunch of soil and grasses, right? Well, you are partly right. Like I said earlier, we talked about different types of grasses and forbs you should know about. So what about the soil that is underneath the plants? Soils are a main factor of what plant species will grow in certain areas. Some of the best grasses for cattle grazing come from wetlands or loamy overflow. You won't really see those soils in the Sandhills of Nebraska.

There are twelve types of soils in Range Judging. Wetlands, Subirrigated, Saline Subirrigated, Loamy Overflow, Sands, Sandy, Loamy Upland, Clayey, Choppy Sands, Limy Upland, Shallow, and Loess Breaks. The main one that occur in Nebraska are Loamy Overflow, Sands, Sandy, Loamy Upland, and Limy Upland.

One of the components of the Range Judging Contest is the Ranch Map. The Ranch Map is a map, that includes a series of problems that need answered by each contestant. Some of the questions that will be answered during this problem is how many cattle could you graze in a pasture, or to knowing when the salt and mineral locations need to be changed. One of the reasons the Ranch Map is included in the contest is because it helps to calculate how much forage is out there for your cattle, or whatever other animals you are going to be putting in that pasture.

Another important component you will learn about from the Ranch Map, is AUMs. AUMs stands for Animal Units per Month. Every animal has a certain unit number. The AUM is based off of a 1000 pound cow. One 1000 pound cow is 1.0 AU. For instance, a bull that weighs 1500 pounds would make his AU = 1.5. A cow/calf pair that weighs 1300 pounds would make that pair's AU = to 1.3. Once the contestant calculates the AU, you use the formula of how many cattle you have and multiply it by how many months the animals will be in the pasture. Let's say 100 cows that with 1000 lbs. each. You would take 100 times 1.0. Once you get that number, you take that number times the number of months the animals will be in the pasture. If the cattle are there for 5 months, then you would have $100 \times 1.0 \times 5$ and the answer would be 500. You will have need to have 500 AUMs. The next step is to calculate how many AUMs are actually available in the pasture.

There are usually two methods you can calculate the AUMs available. 1) The Ranch Map tells you how many AUMs are there or you will need to add up the number of AUMs per site of soil. If your available AUMs is less than your needed AUMs, you might have to sell cattle or don't let the cows graze as long in the pasture. After the problems have been completed, you have to answer the rest of the questions that are asked about the Ranch Map. There are twelve questions based off of reviewing the Ranch Map and calculating if grazing should be completed or not. The final part of the Range Judging contest is completing the 10 question test. This test consists of questions about Range Judging for the state you are in.

From judging what kinds of plants, grasses, forbs and soils are out in the pasture, to know how to calculate how many AUMs are available for your animals, Range Judging has been one of the most positive impacts in my life. Going to the Nebraska Range Camp, to winning the Nebraska State Range Judging Competition with my FFA chapter's team, have helped me decide what career path I would like to travel down. I believe that the skills that contestants learn through the Range Judging Contest are an important life skill that students and adults should know.