

Rotational Grazing

Background

Rotational grazing is not a new concept to most managers. Grazing rotations have been in place going back to buffalo traveling across the landscape moving on to greener grass. Determining the correct stocking rate is the key to making a rotational grazing system work; if stocking rate is not right, the rotation system will not work. Before entering a rotation system, one must consider infrastructure (water sources and fencing), time available, and type of livestock being grazed. Finally, rotational grazing must be implemented in a manner to keep adequate cover on the ground and allow the forage base time to fully recover from grazing events.



Process

The rule of “take half, leave half” is what most use to determine proper use. The half left is the most important as this is needed to feed the soil biology, keep the soil cooler to reduce evaporation and maintain living soil biology, and to reduce water evaporation from the soil profile. Rotational grazing allows a manager to reduce overall disturbance to the land. The ability to allow pastures and forages to recover from disturbances such as grazing events, drought, fire (prescribed or wild), and even heavy rainfall (if that ever occurs) is vital to maintaining a healthy forage base that can maintain functioning water and nutrient cycles. Allowing plants recovery periods also provides for a greater diversity of plants in rangeland settings. A diverse forage base allows some selectivity by animals to balance their diet to get exactly what they need; and like humans, livestock do not like eating the same thing all the time. Diversity in the landscape also means diversity in root structure of plants, which can improve soil structure and allow for more water holding capacity in the soil. Diversity also means that we have something green and growing for a majority of the year. Again, this allows animals better opportunities to select a diet that meets their needs. Further, having living, actively growing plants most of the year will also feed the “underground herd”, the soil biology, which will maintain a nutrient cycle allowing the rangeland plants to be self-sustaining and more productive. It is important to monitor key areas at key times of the year and be flexible with stocking rates so the forage base is maintained. Rotating mineral and feeding locations is important to have greater grazing distribution across the landscape and reduce the potential for spot over-grazing.

Summary

Overall, rotational grazing allows for a healthy forage base, which in turn relates to a healthy animal. The idea is to put as many animals on as small of an area for as short of a time as possible. This will allow the most amount of time for the forage base to rest and recover from grazing events. A healthy forage base also means a healthy soil resource. Healthy soil is better able to infiltrate water, providing moisture during dry periods, and maintain nutrient cycle to make all forages as productive as possible.



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