

ADJUSTING STOCKING RATES

Are you trying to make your pastures support as many animals as they did for your dad or even grandad? Is that a wise goal?

Almost weekly I hear statements like ‘Dad used to graze a hundred cows on this pasture all season and now I run out after four months with only ninety cows. What’s wrong with my pasture?’

Often there is nothing seriously wrong with the pasture, although pasture production might be increased by using improved grazing techniques, fertilizer, and weed control. More often, though, the main problem actually is the cows, or more precisely, how we count the cows.

Fifty years ago, most cows were straight English breeds, often easy-keeping Herefords that seldom weighted over a thousand pounds. Folks calved in April and May, so they started on pasture with about a hundred pound calf. Now it’s not unusual to have fourteen hundred pound cows or even larger with February calves weighing three hundred pounds when they start grazing.

That’s a big change, grazing a thousand pound cow with a one hundred pound calf to a fourteen hundred pound cow with a three hundred pound calf. Eleven hundred pounds per pair versus seventeen hundred pounds per pair.

Cattle tend to eat ten to fifteen pounds of green grass for every hundred pounds of body weight. So some of today’s cow-calf pairs eat almost fifty percent more when they start grazing in the spring than pairs ate years ago.

So instead of worrying about stocking rate, maybe you need to consider stocking weight as your pasture guide. Then when you add better grazing management, fertilizer, and weed control your pastures will do even better than they did for your ancestors.

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