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THE RIGHT STOCKING RATE

Proper stocking is a cornerstone of proper grazing management and a healthy pasture. It's tempting to take the easy route and keep using the same stocking rate year after year. After all, if it's not broke, why fix it? But over time, could this approach do more harm than good?

While we might be aware of the importance of proper stocking, we may fail to properly adjust rates to match the current reality of our operation. Proper stocking depends on two factors, animal intake and pasture productivity. Changes to either of these factors requires an adjustment to occur. Often though, change to our systems takes place slowly. Because we as humans are hard wired to address the here-and-now, slow change often goes by us unnoticed. Over time, these slow shifts can throw the balance off.

Production can change for the worse or better. Improving management practices like resting pastures, fertilization, or improving distribution may have actually improved production and led to understocking over time. When this happens we can add a few more animals to the pasture and recoup on our investment in proper management.

One of the biggest variations in dry land, pasture yield comes from precipitation. Flexible systems like yearling or custom grazing operations are ideally positioned to take advantage of this reality by adding or reducing animal numbers to match the current conditions. The entire operation doesn't have to consist of these flexible components to reap the rewards. Even a relatively small number of yearlings in a cow calf operation can provide benefits.

On the negative side, prolonged overgrazing or encroachment of invasive species like leafy spurge or cedar trees can eat away production. It is estimated that a single cedar tree with an 8-foot diameter could reduce forage production by 3 pounds annually. If you had a density of 200 trees per acre, that would translate into nearly a 1/3 loss in forage production because of the effects of area coverage, moisture use, and shading.

When we look at the demand side of the stocking equation, animal size has a direct correlation with consumption. So a 1400 lb. cow will naturally need to consume more than a 1200 lb. animal. While this difference may seem small (5.2 lb. of air dried forage per day), this quickly adds up across the herd and over the grazing season.

Animal genetic disposition can add to the demand equation. Many herds have over time selected for production genetics like milk, growth, and muscle. There is nothing wrong with this, but increased productivity requires increased inputs to work. Over time this focus on production and animal size means the average cow today consumes more forage than its counterpart 20 years ago.

Getting stocking correct is often the difference between a healthy pasture and one that's struggling. To get it right, look at impacts on production like grazing management and invasive species as well as demand, factors like animal size and genetic disposition. Take the time to balance these out regularly and your pasture and herd will thank you.

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