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Pasture Monitoring and Records

Are your pastures better off or worse than they were this time last year? How about the year before that? And before that? As humans, long term memory has never been a strong suite. Maybe you were able to answer a simple better or worse question 3-4 years out, but when we start getting more detailed in our analysis, answering gets even harder. Did the species present change in any way? How much difference was there in yield between years? Has any production been lost due to invasive species like spurge or cedar?

Finding answers to these questions is hard to do, but can provide a lot of insight to our management decisions if available. On the livestock side of our operation, tracking weaning weights and calves born, can tell us what direction the operation is headed and where to focus time and labor. Having records for our grazing lands can play a similar role. How do we do it? By implementing a pasture monitoring and record keeping system.

Regular pasture monitoring can be divided into two basic groups, numbers and photos. Numbers are hard data we collect, lbs. of forage produced per acre, grass height, number of species in a given area. These typically take a bit more effort on our part to collect, but can offer solid information to make decisions on. One of the most difficult to collect is production or yield, which often requires clipping a certain area, then drying and weighing the harvest to get an estimate of production. While hand clipping a pasture is not on the top of anyone's to-do list, being able to look and say that production was down 27% from this time last year could be an invaluable asset when making decisions in a drought.

The second group of monitoring information is photos. Visual assessments don't provide the hard and fast data that other collection techniques may provide, but they are able to provide great insights on pasture health trends over time. For these assessments, a location that is easy to find again, offers a good view of the pasture, and can capture a relatively static landmark is selected. It might be a marked fence post or a dedicated spot on a hill that overlooks a good percentage of the pasture and has a lone tree or uniquely shaped hill in the background.

Once selected, a photo is taken from this same spot, at the same time of year, facing the same direction, and preferably at the same angle and height (this is where the fence post really shines), year after year. With the landmark to act as a point of reference, these photos can be compared over years to see how management has affected the pasture. Slow changes like a different grass species taking over, encroachment by weeds or trees, or even overall production trend can be seen as they shift over time. These are not hard numbers we can readily utilize like the sampling, but are invaluable in of themselves.

The last portion of this puzzle is storing and using this information. For the technology savvy, phone apps like GrassSnap and computer record keeping software are available, but honestly a notebook in the office can do just as well. The key is maintaining the records and then using the information. If the data collected isn't being used, then it doesn't matter how it's stored.

Monitoring pasture health and trend through a dedicated monitoring system can seem like a daunting program to get started with. It doesn't have to be. Start small and easy, maybe with a single photo point and work out from there. You'll find that the added insight this information provides to guide management is well worth the time and effort.

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