

Stewardship: Part 2 of 4

Grazing stewardship

In the world of range management there is a great deal of debate as to what “proper use” of an operation is. Some graze as a function of “if it’s green, it’s grazable” and others see it as a function of intense planning, implementation, and monitoring. In truth proper use is about allowing plants to grow in a manner that sustains a healthy plant community while allowing a livestock operation the ability to make a profit and maintain the standard of living they aspire to have.

In reality, managing the grazing of an operation is about mimicking nature and utilizing the tools we have at our disposal to do that. Livestock afford us the



Fenceline contrast showing overuse to the left of the fence. 8/12/1960, Lewis & Clark County, Photo credit: B.C. McLean

opportunity to produce a product that gives our livestock growers the opportunity to make a living while being stewards of their resources through grazing. The question is, how to best manage that.

Grasses in Lewis & Clark County, on range areas, are dominated by “bunchgrass” communities, Blue bunch Wheatgrass,

Rough Fescue, Idaho Fescue, etc. These communities are 100%

dependent on producing seed for reproduction, and will reduce in stature (get smaller) as they are continually and heavily grazed. But, does that mean “no grazing” is the answer for these communities? No, it just means a thoughtful grazing system is needed to maintain a healthy & productive community over time. The bunch grass community evolved with fire and wildlife grazing for eons and disturbance assists in keeping the grass stand “fresh” and lush over time. But like any resource, excessive use, over long periods of time, can cause a decrease in productivity and eventually, a loss of the resource if not properly managed.

There are many organizations that can help you as a producer look at your grass stand and figure out where you’re at, and where you’re going. The state of Montana has the Rangeland Resource Program. Our conservation district, in partnership with the US

Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), has opportunities to assist you in improving your operation. It's just as simple as picking up a phone and giving us a holler.

The first & last thing to think about is this, what are your goals and objectives for your operation, and what do you feel would be beneficial to assist you in moving your operation in a positive direction. You may know your cattle linger along the creek while they won't go to the top of the hill to eat on all that grass up there. Maybe a cross fence on top of the ridge and a couple of strategic stock tanks are needed to keep them up top. Maybe you have your grazing system set up, but that one spring pasture is still looking "rough" and you can't figure out why. The groups previously mentioned can give you some suggestions and ways to possibly start fixing the problems you see. But the key is knowing where you're currently at, what your ground will give you, and where you want to be down the road.

Some folks simply want to start with a cross fence and a stock tank with some suggestions on tweaking timing of grazing and see where that goes, others, want a fully laid out plan of how to attack the issues and go all in on addressing issues. Those decisions are yours and yours alone, we simply want to make sure you are aware of the opportunities available to you, and know that there are people available to you, throughout Montana and in Lewis & Clark County willing to help if you need it.

Please feel welcome to give the Conservation District a call at 406 449 5000 x112 or the NRCS at x101 to see where they can help.

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