Steps and Requirements in Establishment of Grazing Systems

Sid E. Salzman

The highest priority in establishment of a different grazing system is an evaluation of the operation. Does the rancher really want a different grazing system? If the answer to that question is no, then it makes no difference how good a new grazing system may be; it is condemned to failure. The operator can make a good grazing system fail and a poor system work. To emphasize the importance of the operator, some of the attributes that an operator must have to maximize the opportunity for the successful establishment of a grazing system are outlined. He should have a genuine interest in grass, a note at the bank, enough greed to want to make more money, willingness to take a chance, nerve enough to withstand criticisms of neighbors, willingness to accept and heed advice from technical people, and the time and inclination to observe and evaluate his program and to constantly update it. Well-meaning technical people can urge ranchers to adapt new grazing programs without considering the capabilities or management objectives of an operator. This can lead to failure because the grazing system didn’t “fit” the operator and as a result everyone lost and a good grazing practice was discredited.

Forage resources must be evaluated thoroughly as the next step in the establishment of a grazing system. The grass inventory is the first area to examine, which is relatively easy to do with the help of a range specialist. He will evaluate the carrying capacity of a ranch on an annual and monthly basis. The monthly evaluation of production is very important because the poorest month of feed production is the limiting factor, determining the number of cattle available to utilize the production from the best month. Traditionally, the winter months in the Sandhills of Nebraska are the limiting months. Next, practices to increase the low months of production to match the high months of production, allowing more complete utilization of production during high months, must be considered. Some of the possibilities to increase these poor months are: use of crop residues, fertilization of hayland, supplemental feed, irrigated pasture, and hay. Another possibility is to buy more cattle in the high months of production and stock the basic herd for the poor months. These are not all the possibilities; they are merely used to point out alternatives available to solve this monthly feed flow in the Sandhills.

The next step is to analyze the cattle inventory. The number of cattle is not the most important thing. The class of cattle is the most important criterion in setting up a range-forage program. There are several kinds of cattle available to

Salzman is a rancher from Ainsworth, Nebr. This is the script of a talk he presented at the Third Annual Rangeland Symposium at Lincoln, Nebr., April 21, 1982. The Symposium entitled "Grazing Programs for Nebraska" was sponsored by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Range Management Club.
decrease our cattle numbers and this allowed us to increase. We ran more fall cows and yearling steers to utilize excess hay in the winter, retained our spring cows to clean up the rough feed in the fall, started renting pasture, started grazing wet hay meadows, and adapted a deferred rotation grazing system to get more production from our own range. We were just beginning to get the "bugs" out of these new methods when irrigated corn stalks and feedlots made their appearance in our area. This enabled us to increase the spring cow herd to utilize corn stalks and allowed us to increase summer stocking rates since cattle could leave range early and go to the feedlots.

Recently, early winter weaning of the fall calves has been implemented. This saved 1 ton of hay per cow and gave us a group of cows to clean-up "junk" feed in the spring of the year when previously we did not have any use for it. Junk feed includes quackgrass (Agropyron repens) areas, stackyard with hay mats, weeds in wintering ground, and corn fields previously grazed by spring cows. Junk feeds will provide a maintenance ration, although there will be a temporary weight loss on gestating cows. These forage and cattle management changes are mentioned to illustrate the flexibility required in grass programs.

We feel the application of these grazing systems has helped our operation. It has not been without mistakes and I want to pass along a little philosophy and feelings we have developed about our grazing programs. We personally like a 4-pasture rotation and use some 3-pasture rotations. We do not like a 2-pasture rotation as well because we always have cattle in the wrong place at the wrong time. We have moved away from a structured and disciplined rotation on much of the ranch and basically try to graze a pasture intensively with large numbers of cattle so that the grazing period is from 20-30 days and aim for 70% utilization. I am convinced that intensity of grazing doesn't hurt a pasture, even a sandy one, if the grazing period does not exceed 30 days. Under this type of grazing the condition class of our pastures has improved. We graze our pastures not by the calendar but by when the grass is gone. This is not to imply that structured systems are not useful. They are the place to start in rotation grazing; as confidence builds with grazing programs, other programs can be considered. Gains are not quite as good under rotational grazing and since some pastures are rented, cattle that are merchandized (the yearlings) are put in rented pastures under continuous grazing. Wet hay meadow grazing has some problems—wet ground in spring, patch grazing unless there is a high stocking rate, and a tremendous fly problem starting in the middle of June. Dry fall cows graze this ground since they do an excellent clean-up job and the gain in May and June is not critical on this group of cattle.

This may appear to be a pessimistic evaluation of grazing systems. However, it is merely to caution that sometimes no change in a grazing program is best. A grazing program must fit the man, the ranch, the cattle and be flexible to be successful.

Manipulating the grazing program within the constraints of forage, livestock, and current markets for optimum return is very dynamic. The manager's job is not completed when a grazing program is implemented. The challenge is just beginning.

NCA "Technology Development" and "Cattle Businessman" Awards

The National Cattlemen's Assn, has released information on its new "technology development" award. The award will be presented annually to an individual or individuals for the discovery, development and/or application of technology which materially increases efficiency and profitability of beef cattle production.

The new award, to be presented at the 1984 NCA convention during January in New Orleans, is being sponsored by the IBP Foundation. IBP will contribute $10,000 to the NCA foundation on behalf of the recipient. The NCA foundation will use the money to foster research and education programs for the betterment of the beef cattle industry.

In addition, IBP will provide the award winner with $1,000 in cash and will pay expenses to attend the 1984 NCA convention in New Orleans. The recipient will also receive a limited edition bronze entitled "A Special Breed," created by Oklahoma artist Jim Miller and commissioned specifically for this award.

Each award nominee must be an individual (not a company) or individuals involved in a team effort, and may be from commercial industry, government, educational and/or other research institutions, or may be a private producer.

The National Cattlemen's Assn, has also announced plans for its new "cattle businessman of the year" award. The award will be presented annually to an individual cattlemen who has demonstrated outstanding and innovative business management and who, as an industry leader, has made significant contributions to beef production.

Editor's Note: Work in range management should be very valuable for this contest. Hurry and don't miss the deadline.

The 1984 award, to be presented at the 1984 NCA convention in January in New Orleans, is being sponsored by the Ralston Purina Co. Purina will contribute $10,000 to the National Cattlemen's Foundation, which sponsors research and education programs. The company also will provide $1,000 in cash for the award winner, a permanent plaque for display in NCA headquarters, and expenses for the recipient to attend the 1984 convention.

Each award nominee must be a producing cattlemen (not a company) who generates a substantial portion of his/her income from the beef cattle business. Criteria to be used by the selection committee will include such things as use of production technology, record keeping, financial planning, marketing, risk reduction and resource management.

Nominations and supporting material must be received by NCA at its national headquarters no later than Oct. 31, 1983. Nomination forms and further information may be obtained by contacting Sandy Gallagher, NCA, P. O. Box 3469, Englewood, CO 80155 (303/694-0305).