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Grazing Management Strategies for Stocker Cattle

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Practicing good grazing management strategies can be very beneficial to a stocker operation. Pastureland that has been managed appropriately will be more productive for a longer period of time, have higher forage quality, and forage waste will be reduced.

Stocking rate is one of the most important management decisions you can make. It will influence the total amount of animal product your operation is able to produce. Stocking rate impacts the persistence and productivity of forages in your pastures. There are several questions to ask yourself to help determine what your optimum stocking rate will be.

What level of forage production do you have? Improved pastures with adequate fertilization will provide high forage production and create a scenario in which stocking rates can be increased to take advantage of high forage availability. When stocking rates are low, forage availability and animal productivity are initially high. However, pasture quality will eventually decline at low stocking rates because there is not enough grazing pressure to prevent forages from accumulating stems and dead leaves. Animal intake will begin to decrease along with performance. Underutilizing forages with low stocking rates is not economical. Less forage is available per animal as stocking rates are increased but forage will be better utilized and animal output per acre will go up. However, care should be taken not to allow overgrazing of pastures. A minimum forage height (which varies depending on the forage species) must be maintained to prevent the energy reserves of the forage from being depleted. The result is weaker plants and potentially loss of the stand. A decrease in the overall forage production will ultimately decrease animal production.

How accessible is your forage? If areas of shade and water are isolated in your pastures this can lead to those areas being overgrazed while other go underutilized. Portable shade structures and moving mineral or supplement feeders around to different locations within your pastures will help improve pasture utilization. Rotational stocking will also help in this situation and will be discussed later on.

What forages are in the pasture and what is their nutritive value? Cattle are selective grazers and by doing so can improve their own diet. They choose green leaves over dead leaves, and leaves over stems which are comparatively the more nutritious parts of the plant. In many cases cattle show a partial preference for legumes (such as clovers) over grasses. If your forage quality is high and forage availability is adequate then this selectivity is not a concern. Stocking rate can be used as a tool to change the composition of the pasture itself. Heavy stocking for example will favor certain forages over others. Pasture management including fertilization and clipping dead stems can improve overall pasture nutritive value. Forage testing can provide more detailed

information the nutritive value of forages in your pastures. Knowing what plant species are in your pastures will also help you to better gauge seasonal variations in your forage production. As forage production fluctuates, so should stocking rates. Stocking heavier during periods of rapid pasture growth and harvesting surplus forage will more efficiently utilize the forage than stocking light and allowing pastures to become too mature.

A variety of grazing methods can be used to tailor your own grazing management strategy. Efficiently managing the quality and quantity of forage in your pastures should be the ultimate goal, regardless of which grazing method you use. The decision of which method to use depends largely on the resources you have available. Each method has advantages and disadvantages which can help you choose which method is right for your operation. Grazing methods are usually broken down into two basic types: continuous or rotational. There are also variations within these two types that differ in their management requirements.

In general, continuous stocking refers to the practice of grazing cattle within one pasture for the entire grazing season. Pastures are subdivided into paddocks in a rotational stocking system and cattle are moved between these paddocks during the grazing season. This allows a period of rest for the paddock after each grazing period.

Advantages of continuous stocking are lower setup costs and lower management requirements. The animals also have a larger area from which to select their own diet. One disadvantage is that stocking rates must be lower. Other disadvantages are that pastures may become patchy with some areas becoming overgrazed while others are undergrazed potentially allowing encroachment of undesirable plants and decreases in forage quality if not managed appropriately.

Advantages of rotational stocking are that forages have time to rest and regrow after grazing and as a manager you can match periods of grazing to plant growth. Higher stocking rates can be used and forages can be better utilized. Animal dung and urine are more evenly distributed throughout the farm as the animals move between paddocks. Often the overall management of the operation also improves because pastures and animals are being monitored more frequently. Rotational stocking does have some disadvantages though as more time and labor are required. Subdividing pastures will also mean additional costs for fencing and water. Rotational grazing may not work on every operation depending on the quality of soils and forages or the farm layout itself.

One point to remember is that which grazing method is used is not as important as stocking rate. The key is to think ahead when making plans for the future and having organization within your operation. Try to assess what resources are going to be available to you throughout the year. Reviewing records from previous years is a good place to start. Plan for the changes in forage production that will occur during the year and think about what management decisions will need to be made when those times come. For more information about stocker production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service.