



P.O. Box 133
Whiting, Kansas 66552
(785) 873-3431
FAX (785)- 873-3432
E-mail: ksrc@rainbowtel.net
Website: www.kansasruralcenter.org

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JUDY CHALLENGES GRAZIER'S ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT MOB GRAZING

By Jason Schmidt

Junction City - About 200 graziers from across Kansas converged on Junction City for the annual Kansas Graziers Association (KGA) winter conference on Saturday, January 15. Greg Judy, the keynote speaker, runs a grazing operation near Clarks, Missouri, on 1400 acres of pasture using holistic high density planned grazing. The Judys have developed a successful grazing business by leasing land, reducing input costs, employing high density grazing, and utilizing multi-species grazing.

This year's record attendance at the KGA annual conference indicates increased interest in grazing systems, especially in Greg Judy's concept of "mob grazing." Mob grazing focuses on increasing stock density. This is accomplished by bunching all animals into a single herd, confining the herd to small paddocks with the use of temporary polywire and frequently moving the "mob" once or twice a day. Pastures are only grazed twice per year – once during the growing season and once during the dormant season. Judy says this grazing strategy requires a huge paradigm shift for most graziers.

Over the past six years, Judy has changed his focus from managing grass in the vegetative stage using management intensive grazing (MIG), to managing mature grass. The Judys were on the verge of bankruptcy because while utilizing MIG grazing they had to rely heavily on fertilizer and feeding hay during the winter. Judy now claims to have turned his fortunes around after adopting mob grazing by removing reliance on chemical fertilizer, hay feeding, and owning expensive equipment. Looking ahead to the future, Judy challenges, "We are staring at peak oil. Fuel prices will begin to skyrocket, which will raise the price of hay. Soon we won't be able to afford not to graze."

The benefits of mob grazing are realized through the short episodes of high animal impact (75,000 to half a million lbs per acre) followed by long rest periods. During these grazing episodes, Judy's goal is to graze 60% of the forage, trample 30%, and leave 10% of the forage standing. Only grazing 60% ensures animals can select the highest quality forage. Trampling 30% allows a large amount of litter to feed earthworms and microbes which will build soil. And, leaving 10% of the forage standing provides protection from wind and water evaporation while also providing wildlife habitat.

High stock density is not the same as high stocking rates. Stock density is the number of animals on a given area of land at one time, while stocking rate is the number of animals on an entire farm. Judy suggests not increasing your stocking rate for the first two years after adopting high density stocking to allow time for your pastures to recover. When first adopting mob grazing on poor soils, supplementation with hay may be necessary to begin building soil litter. Judy stressed the need to both feed the soil and feed the animal. Litter left after a graze has multiple soil functions including food for soil microbial life, increased soil moisture, which reduces runoff, reduced weed competition, and the building of new soil.

Judy challenged the audience to avoid the temptation to hay excess forage in the spring. "Tall forage is scary," says Judy. But this tall forage should be treated as a savings account. Forage that is not grazed in the spring will act as a ground shield to hold soil moisture and catch dew during the hot dry summer months. Underneath this tall grass shield during any month of the year, the soil is alive with earthworms, soil microbes, and spiders.

Judy's approach also promotes healthy pasture polycultures. "A single monoculture is not good for anything," Judy boldly claims. Judy focuses on utilizing the existing seedbank that is stimulated by the heavy impact of mob grazing to initially promote the resurgence of a polyculture. If there is no legume seedbank, an initial seeding of clovers and other legumes may be necessary. But, once established, tall grass grazing will ensure the legumes will mature and reseed themselves. With a good combination of grasses and legumes, the need for nitrogen fertilizer is removed.

Healthy polycultures resulting from mob grazing will lead to increased animal performance, and eventually higher forage yields which will increase stocking rates. In Judy's words, we are capturing an unrealized asset by increasing our pasture's stocking rate. By increasing our forage yields, we are in a sense increasing our land base without buying more land. Judy has doubled the stocking rate of his pastures since adopting mob grazing.

Not only does mob grazing increase the health of the soil and plants, but Judy also described how mob grazing can heal riparian areas. Cattle will destroy a riparian area or pond if they are given unlimited access. But if only left there for one day, cattle can be a positive impact by promoting healthier stands of grass. Judy never allows livestock full access to ponds, but he is rethinking the cost effectiveness and ecological health of fencing out an entire pond and installing a waterer. Instead, Judy has moved to fencing off corners of the pond with polywire, and daily moving these limited access areas to reduce any deleterious effects to the sides of the pond and water quality. In the same way, Judy recommends rapidly moving cattle through riparian areas. He suggests that high density stocking for short periods can actually heal old erosion problems by the trampling effect, increased litter, and long rest periods.

Judy stressed that we cannot get tunnel vision focusing on the health of the grass and soil while ignoring the health of the animal. Mob grazing should never inhibit animal performance. Judy challenged, "There is no magic in this; the animals have to get enough protein and energy to stay alive." Judy's number one rule is

to never limit his animals' intake. If cattle are agitated or bawling, they likely do not have enough to eat. He also never pushes his animals to clean up a graze. Forcing animals to eat less desirable forage reduces the amount of ground litter and also reduces animal performance. Judy wants to ensure that his animals have the opportunity to select the highest quality forage, while trampling the low quality forage to feed the soil.

Judy's success with mob grazing may be due in part to his cool season, fescue/clover dominated pastures, which allows him to extend his grazing season year around. Dale Kirkham with the Kansas Rural Center commented that, "In our native prairie, I don't see much way to gain a lot on the length of the growing season. I am thinking that a version of mob grazing might be used to trample more dead growth during the late fall and winter to reduce the need for fire which would also allow more growth from more cool season species." Furthermore, Dale Strickler, KGA president, is concerned about decreased animal performance. "Native pasture lignifies faster than cool season pasture, which will lower animal performance." Strickler sees huge potential for building soil with mob grazing, but would only feel comfortable using dry cows that can survive on the low quality and low protein content of mature forage.

Judy's approach has been very successful for his situation. But, as he cautions, start out slow, supplement as needed, be flexible, and adopt the grazing management strategy that is best suited for your situation. And, above all, have fun! Sponsors for the KGA conference were the Kansas Rural Center, Kansas Grazing Land Coalition, Kansas Farmers Union, and Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture. For more information on KGA or to be added to the mailing list contact Mary Howell, 785-562-8726 or marshallcofair@gmail.com.