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GERRISH SHARES GRAZING EXPERTISE WITH KANSAS PRODUCERS AT BEEF FEST

By Mark Parker

Emporia, Ks.- When Jim Gerrish looks at a pasture, he sees a giant solar panel harvesting sunlight to grow forage for grazing animals.

“If you think of every acre you manage as a 43,560-square foot solar panel, you’ll begin to see how you can improve your operation,” the nationally known grazing expert told more than 130 people at the recent Flint Hills Beef Fest in Emporia, Kan.

The event was one of five grazing workshops produced across the state by the Kansas Rural Center with a grant awarded by USDA’s Risk Management Agency. Co-sponsors were the Kansas Farmers Union, the Kansas Grazing Lands Coalition, Kansas SARE and Flint Hills Beef Fest. Approximately 350 people participated in the workshop series.

Gerrish, known for his pioneering work in management intensive grazing at the University of Missouri and, more recently, as a grazing manager and consultant, challenged the cattlemen and women to be more efficient in capturing solar energy and managing the water and soil nutrients that fuel forage growth. Green, growing leaves, he pointed out, maximize photosynthesis while bare ground and brown plants do not capture solar energy.

“It takes grass to grow grass,” emphasized Gerrish who now operates out of May, Idaho. “Grazing too short is the biggest cause of lost pasture. ... When you take off too much leaf, you have less leaf area for photosynthesis, you’ll have less roots and it will take much longer to get back to grazeable grass.

Controlled grazing is the beef producer’s best sun, soil and water management tool, he said, adding that the forage left behind when cows leave a paddock is the most important consideration. “The residual forage impacts not only regrowth but the soil organisms that cycle nutrients, water infiltration and runoff, and root development.”

In a controlled grazing system, Gerrish suggested that graziers consider three phases of grass growth. Phase I grass is highly nutritious but does not provide cattle with “a big enough bite” to provide the quantity of nutrition

needed. Phase III is mature, dried grass with plenty of quantity but poor quality. Rather than using grass height as a deciding factor, Gerrish advised that cattle should enter a paddock at the early stages of phase II and exit toward the end of that phase, providing a quality-quantity compromise and leaving adequate leaf area for regrowth. Phase II, he explained, begins when grass has three full leaves and ends when it has five leaves and is entering the boot stage.

Gerrish added that, the shorter the grazing period, the more times cattle cycle through the system and that results in higher forage utilization efficiency as well as greater opportunity for profit.

“The more pounds of beef per acre, the lower your cost is per pound as long as that increase comes from management and not from purchased inputs,” he said. “There’s nothing wrong with purchased inputs if your management allows you to capitalize a return from them. Done right, though, controlled grazing offers you your biggest opportunity to make more dollars.”

That opportunity, he said, exists because money spent on feeding cows — especially during winter — represents beef producers’ biggest cost by far. Management intensive grazing, Gerrish asserted, can dramatically reduce costs by greatly reducing or even eliminating the need for hay.

“It’s not just about grazing more cows,” Gerrish said. “You can probably make the biggest impact by being able to graze the same number of cows more days of the year.”

Stockpiling forage for winter grazing and increasing plant diversity to extend the grazing season, he said, can virtually eliminate the use of mechanically harvested forage. Pointing out that cattlemen from Minnesota to Mississippi feed hay about 130 days a year, Gerrish said reliance on hay has little to do with weather and more to do with not having a plan for adequate year-round standing forage.

Other key points in Gerrish’s presentation included:

- Healthy grasslands must be utilized. Because the grassland ecosystem evolved with grazing animals, most grass species require grazing to remain healthy and productive.
- On native range, water development may be the most powerful grazing management tool if water location results in too much travel time for cattle or impacts grazing distribution.
- On high rainfall area improved pastures, weekly rotation increases grazing efficiency to 50-60%, 3-5 days to 60-70%, and 1-2 days to 80-90% compared to about 30-50% for continuous grazing scenarios.
- Grassland recovery periods vary with stage of growth and conditions but tallgrass prairie sites require significantly more recovery time than cool season pastures.
- “The cow lives on her dinner plate.” The longer a cow is in a given area, the more forage is lost due to fouling, camping, trampling and over-grazing.

- Legumes like red clover, alsike and birdsfoot trefoil need about 55 days to rest and reseed. Native grasses need a longer recovery period than tame cool season grasses.

- Most grasses have only about five days of stored carbon so regrowth is determined by the amount of leaf area remaining after grazing.

- A week-long grazing period can result in “roller coaster” diets and inconsistent intake because when cattle enter they consume a high amount of good forage but are down to maintenance quality and quantity by the end of the period. “If you’re going to do it,” Gerrish said, “make grazing periods three days or less.”

- A grazing system must make sense both economically and biologically in order to be sustainable.

- Approximately 57% of the variation in average beef herd profitability is due to feed cost while differences in weaning weights accounts for less than 5%. “If you don’t deal with feed costs,” Gerrish said, “nothing else matters.”

- Grazing management is more important to weaning weight than a cow’s milk production because, at three months of age, calves rely more on grazing than milk for nutrition.

- Sampling and testing dormant winter forage can save money by determining whether or not supplemental nutrition is needed.

- Winter is a great time for strip grazing because, left to make her own grazing decisions, the cow will consume the best forage first, leaving only trampled, weathered forage toward the end of the season. “Make ‘em eat the good, the bad and the ugly,” Gerrish said. “Strip grazing on three-day intervals is like feeding a protein supplement every three days because they enter a paddock with higher quality than the one they just left.”

- Cows will graze through snow but only if there is adequate forage beneath the snow and not a mere three or four inches of grass.

Interest in optimizing pasture return and productivity ran high at the Emporia event as beef producers took advantage of the opportunity to question Gerrish about how management intensive grazing principles relate to their individual situations.

More information on Gerrish is available at www.americangrazinglands.com.

The Kansas Rural Center is a grassroots organization committed to economically viable, environmentally sound, and socially sustainable rural culture. For more information, contact KRC by calling 785-87303431 or by visiting the Kansas Rural Center web site, www.kansasruralcenter.org