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GRAZING SCHOOL DELIVERS GRASSROOTS EDUCATION
By Mark Parker

Learning the art and science of grazing livestock is a lifetime quest but sometimes the comprehension curve gets a big boost.

The Eastern Kansas Grazing School provided that opportunity as farmers and ranchers tapped into wide-ranging expertise in a two-day learning experience held recently at Holton and sponsored by the Kansas Rural Center, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and Kansas State University Extension.

Setting the stage for the school was David Kraft, NRCS state rangeland management specialist. Management intensive grazing, Kraft said, is a goal-driven approach to managing grassland resources for long-term sustainability.

“Livestock intensively graze by nature — they’re very selective in what they eat,” Kraft told the group. “The challenge is to manipulate the way animals graze to help meet our goals.”

Those goals, he observed, should include enhancing the health and viability of resources in addition to enterprise sustainability and profitability — “They all go hand-in-hand,” he stated.

The fundamentals of successful grazing management, Kraft said, include:

• Meeting the nutritional needs of livestock from standing pasture.

• Optimizing pasture yield, quality and persistence.

• Maintaining or enhancing the natural resource base.

• Integrating appropriate technology and knowledge into a practical and profitable system.

An important part of grazing management, he said, is managing leaf area. New pasture growth, Kraft pointed out, has abundant quality but little quantity. As the plants grow to the reproductive phase, that situation reverses, giving livestock plenty of forage but little nutritional quality. Managing grazing so that animals graze during a period in which both quality and quantity are adequate is the grazier’s challenge, Kraft said, but the critical factor is providing a rest period for forages to recover from grazing.

“A system in which animals graze a specific area — a paddock — for short periods and then that area is allowed to rest is important not only to the sustainability of the plants but to the performance of the livestock,” he noted.

Pointing out that adequate leaf area is essential to photosynthesis and plant growth, Kraft said a period of rest enables the plant to grow back, providing nutrition for livestock as well as for its own root system.

“Short, weak plants mean less root mass and less access to water and nutrients,” he said. “A graze-and-rest system means healthier plants, and healthier plants aren’t just good for the cattle, they’re good for the soil. You’ll have less runoff and less soil loss in a well-managed pasture.”

Kansas State University Cattle Nutritionist K.C. Olson discussed putting grazing and cattle nutrition knowledge into practice. At K-State, Olson “redesigned” the University’s cowherd management strategy to better match forage resources with animal needs. Pointing out that purchased and raised feed cost is the beef producer’s biggest expense, Olson said that a cow’s highest nutritional requirements occur four weeks post-calving while the lowest needs are after the calf is weaned.

Warm season grasses, he said, don’t match up well with a spring-calving system because there is a “hole” between when quality grass is available and when the cow needs it. Cool season grasses and annuals can help fill that gap but with only a warm season forage base at his disposal, Olson opted for moving calving time from February to April. Seasonally appropriate calving, he said, reduced the need for supplemental feed and enabled the cows to be in better condition at calving.

Although later calving results in lighter calves at the traditional weaning time, that effect was offset somewhat by the fact that more calves are born in the first third of the calving season.

“Scheduling calving season so that calving and peak lactation coincide with peak forage quality shortens the winter feeding season,” Olson said, “and simplifies Body Condition Scoring management to help you improve conception.”

Olson told the producers that, if a bigger calf is their goal, they can take feed that would have been given to the cow and give it to the calf. “The calf will use it more efficiently,” he said.

Some producers may want to consider weaning at 150 days rather than at 205 days, Olson suggested. At 150 days the calf is ready to go “on his own,” he said, and early weaning prevents the rapid loss of a cow’s body condition as forage quality declines on native pastures late in the growing season. Calves may be roughly 70 pounds lighter, Olson noted, but much of that value difference will normally be made up by seasonally higher prices.

“You are setting a cow up for failure if you push lactation past forage quality,” he said. “And, for every three days a calf is weaned, there’s about one extra day of grazing for the cow.”

Olson also urged beef producers to match cow type to their environment. Large cows and those that produce a lot of milk, he pointed out, have higher nutritional requirements and graziers should consider whether or not such cows produce enough additional pounds of beef to pay for that difference.

Enabling cattle to learn how to best graze the prairie is also important, the K-State nutritionist said. Animals have to learn how to fit into their environment, especially in terms of selecting better quality forages to graze. Part of that learning process, Olson said, is from cows passing the information along to herd mates, especially in mother-daughter relationships. Research has shown that mature cows are better than heifers at selecting quality forage and Olson suggested fostering relationships between replacement heifers and mature cows can help the young females learn to graze more efficiently.

NCRC Conservationist Doug Spencer advocated taking an inventory of forage resources on individual farms and ranches. That, he said, is the first step in developing and implementing a grazing plan that meets the producer's goal. The grazing school participants took that information and moved outdoors to a pasture classroom. Instructors walked them through the arithmetic and mechanics of pasture allocation, giving the participants the opportunity to plan a grazing system.

Missouri NRCS Conservationist Mark Green provided information on fencing and watering system needs for a management intensive grazing system and K-State Douglas County Extension Agent Bill Wood provided information on grazing economics. Kansas State University Agronomist Doug Shoup and Meadowlark Extension District Educator David Hallauer discussed the very foundation of any agricultural production system, the soil. From soil formation and composition to nutrient management, Shoup and Hallauer provided soil science basics as well as a discussion on forage growth.

The outdoor pasture classrooms where participants gained first-hand grazing management experience were located on the Henry and William Hill farm near Holton and the David and Roberta Spencer farm at Circleville.

The two-day school is supported in part by a grant to the Kansas Rural Center (KRC) from USDA Risk Management Agency. KRC is a grassroots organization committed to an economically viable, environmentally sound, and socially sustainable food and farming system. For more information, contact KRC by calling 785-873-3431, or by visiting the Kansas Rural Center web site, www.kansasruralcenter.org. -30-