

Forage Section

Mob Grazing 101

Start with a high stock density for a short period of time, allow for ample recovery of the plants, and you might yield some impressive pasture results.

by Kindra Gordon

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To traditional cattle ranchers, 250-500 cows — or more — per acre sounds like too many cattle in the pasture. But with management, it can be a tool that is actually beneficial for the pasture.

It's a concept called mob grazing, and it's earning acclaim among grazing enthusiasts here in the U.S. The practice was developed by South African grazing guru Allan Savory and entails using ultra high concentrations of cattle per acre for a short period of time and then giving the plants ample time for rest and regrowth.

To give an example of how concentrated the stock density is with mob grazing, in 1,000 lb. cow terms, it may be 250 to 500 cows — or more — per acre. University of Nebraska Extension Educator Terry Gompert says, "The objective is to create a major disturbance and then move on and give the pasture an extended period of rest — up to a year or more — before it is grazed again."

And what is the effect on the land?

Mob grazing is actually a tool that can restore grass health and productivity, says Gompert, who is also a beef producer.

Gompert has followed the progress of several cow-calf producers who are successfully integrating mob grazing into their operations. He reports

that once the stock densities are concentrated and the animals are moved one or more times per day, forage production is increasing two- to four-fold. Additionally, plant diversity is bouncing back.

Gompert credits this enhanced production to the soil building from the compaction of plants into the ground, the manure distribution from the high stock density and the control of unwanted plants — because the cattle are so highly concentrated in a small area they are forced to eat or trample all the plants in their path.

Give it a try

If you are considering giving mob grazing a try, Gompert suggests doing some experimenting to find what fits your operation. "Different tools work in different environments," he says. And he adds, "You don't need to use ultra high stock density every time. It's a tool like a hammer. You don't use a hammer for every job. Mob graze for one day and see what it does."

He offers these guidelines:

Don't overgraze. Gompert says, "The biggest mistake people make is overgrazing; I call it scorched earth grazing — and this creates animal performance issues." He suggests producers should strive for 60% utilization of plants by livestock — with the remaining 40% knocked down as plant litter.

Real world example

Missouri rancher Greg Judy spent 14 years using management intensive grazing (MIG) on his ranch — but four years ago he made the switch to mob or high stock density grazing.

Judy says he made the switch because with the MIG system he didn't feel he was sustainable. "We had three herds that we were moving, and we felt we were working all the time. And, by July we were always out of grass."

Judy has now combined the cattle into one herd — or mob — and moves them once a day. Using electric fence, he rotates through pastures twice per year — once during the growing season and once during the dormant season.

Today, he reports that his pastures are healthier, new plant species are appearing and it is attracting more wildlife. He has completely reduced his inputs as well. He does not use lime, fertilizer or machinery, and he does not put up any hay. He estimates that he now only feeds hay about eight days out of the year — and he purchases that hay.

Most importantly, his labor demands have decreased, and Judy says his quality of life has "skyrocketed."

Judy says, "With this type of grazing management, I've never been more excited about our future or any farm. It requires no inputs and allows more grazing and more cattle. We're growing top soil, we're sustainable now and we have diversity." **HW**

Don't ignore animal performance. Gompert acknowledges that he has seen some variation in animal performance. In the majority of instances animals will gain weight or maintain their condition. But he has seen some herds where animals can lose weight. So it is important to monitor animal performance.

Be creative. "People often say: 'I don't have enough cows and I don't have enough time,'" says Gompert. He suggests combining your own herds or combining

herds with a neighbor. The latter choice allows you to increase stock density and share land and labor.

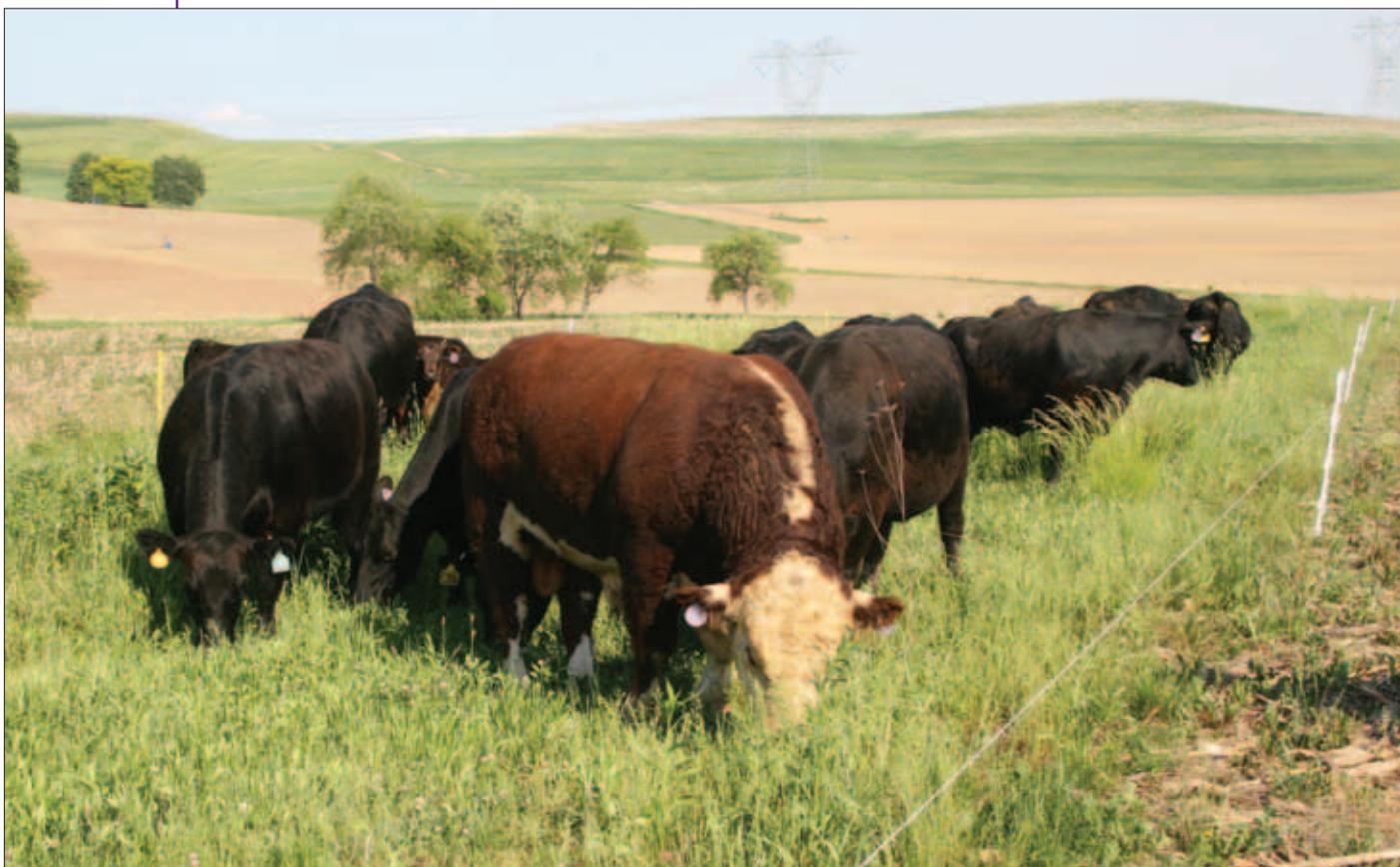
Have a plan. Plan ahead where the cattle will be grazing and what you'll stockpile for fall and winter grazing.

Make the cattle walk. For access to water, a temporary lane can be created with electric fence. The lane can then be moved with each rotation.

Keep back fences optional. Some back fences may be needed when you are first starting a mob movement to prevent cattle from going back to regrow where they've been, but most mob graziers have found that cattle don't go back where they were the day before.

Use ground litter as a key. Once an area has been mob grazed and litter is sufficiently on the ground, cattle need to be moved to a new area.

Allow ample recovery time. This is the most important guideline of all, according to Gompert. All plants should be fully recovered before being grazed again. Gompert gives the example that with management intensive grazing (MIG) many of the plant species decrease over time. He explains this reduction occurs because not all plants have recovered before being grazed again — which means the key species return, but several others tend to decrease. With ample rest, mob grazing allows all plant species in the soil a chance to grow and flourish. **HW**



Mob grazing is concentrated stock grazing — 250 to 500 cows per acre.