West Virginia Pasture Management

Rotational Grazing

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for W.Va. Grassland Limited Resource Farmer Program

Introduction
Rotational grazing is a system of pasture utilization that involves regular shifts of animals from field to field. To make it work you must be flexible.

How it Works
The whole herd is moved onto a small pasture for grazing. When this pasture is grazed off, the herd is moved to a new pasture area. The grazed off pasture is then allowed about a month to recover. This system favors tall-growing grasses and legumes like orchardgrass and red clover and works best when at least three fields are used.

Uses of Three Fields
Need one for first grazing in spring. Need one for late fall grazing. Need one for preparation for next spring’s grazing

Species
Favored: Red clover, birdsfoot trefoil, orchardgrass, tall fescue, timothy
Not favored: Bluegrass, white clover

Advantages
Better opportunity to influence forage species present
Easier weed and brush control
Forage production increases 0 to 25 percent
Allows control of the amount of forage used in each pasture
Better utilization of available forage
May allow some hay to be harvested if terrain permits
May reduce erosion
Helps with livestock health program
Provides some alternatives during low forage producing year

Disadvantages
Requires more time and management skills
More costs for fence construction and maintenance
Greater requirements for water facilities
May not offer the flexibility needed during adverse or season changes
May not yield maximum production due to too short of a rest period between grazings
Increase in production may not justify expenses, time and labor.

Fencing Requirements
Boundary fence requirements unchanged
Division fence can be:
Single-strand electric for cattle
Two-strand electric for cattle and sheep
Water Requirements
Water facility must be located in each field

Expected Animal Performance
Individual animal performance may not change, but the number of animals per acre should increase.

To Establish Rotational Grazing
Determine the areas that will make up your fields. They do not have to be the same size but should produce similar amounts of forage.

Determine how to get water in each field.

Construct the necessary fences.

Set up your rotation. Try to establish the order and the number of days in each field. The animals do not have to be in each field the same number of days.

Check your fields carefully. Be flexible.

Be ready to make adjustments!

Summary
Remember that if any grazing system becomes too rigid, it will fail. So, stay flexible. Remember that you need, at the very least, three fields. Check your fencing needs, water facilities, and management resources. Weigh the advantages against the disadvantages.

Where to Get Help
For more information about rotational grazing, contact your local office of the Soil Conservation Service or the West Virginia University Extension Service. They are listed in the telephone directory under "U.S. Government" and "West Virginia," respectively.