

Have You Thought About Rotational Grazing On Your Farm?

Kurt Calkins, Director of Land and Water Conservation

Over the last several years, utilization and interest in rotational grazing systems throughout Columbia County has been on the increase. Each year we have more and more contacts with landowners who have been thinking about rotational grazing and what it could mean for their livestock operation. Our local UW extension office led by Laura Paine has been providing ongoing educational opportunities for livestock producers to look at what rotational grazing could do for them. From a conservation perspective, rotational grazing makes sense. Acres and acres of land that may have been under intense row cropping are being converted back to permanent grassland pastures. Soil erosion from row cropping continues to be a major input of non point source pollution into our surface waters. This conversion to grasslands brings the soil erosion rates down to little or nothing. Animal concentrations and manure management issues associated with feedlot confinement are lowered and in most cases much easier and cheaper to address.

Why would a landowner be interested in rotational grazing? Lets say the environmental factors are not enough to get you thinking about rotational grazing. How about if I told you that pastures represent a largely untapped resource for farmers. More than one quarter of the Midwest's agricultural land is in some form of pasture. Yet, 80% of these pastures suffer from uneven fertility coupled with serious weed and erosion problems. Most farmers are reluctant to rely too heavily on pastures due to legitimate concerns that the meager amounts of low quality forage pastures typically yield will not adequately feed their high producing livestock.

The primary reason pastures produce so badly is poor management. To produce good livestock feed from pastures, we must manage our pastures differently. Typically pastures are managed on a continuous basis, this results in low pasture yields. By using rotational grazing, you can make a profit from pastures without continual renovation. It does work and does make sense for a lot of operations.

What help is available? This past year I applied for and received a Multi-Agency Grazing Grant for the Columbia County Land and Water Conservation Department. This grant will provide our department access to over \$21,000 in staff support cost over the next 2 years. This grant will allow us to receive reimbursement for technical assistance provided to landowners working on rotational grazing systems. Our goal within the realm of this grant is to help plan and install a minimum of 800 acres of rotational grazing systems within Columbia County over the next 2 to 3 years. **The availability of these funds makes technical assistance to landowners looking at rotational grazing system a high priority for the technical staff within our department.**

There are several options out there that we can look at that may allow us to provide cost share assistance associated with the major components associated with rotational grazing systems. Besides providing the overall design of the grazing system, we can look at providing cost sharing for things such as fencing, seeding, alternate watering facilities, access lanes, and stream crossings. Although there is no guarantee of cost share availability we will do everything we can do to find whatever cost sharing may be available to you and your rotational grazing system. We have several staff members who are very well versed in the design of these systems and if we don't have the answers based on our experience, we will use our network of County LWCD staff and NRCS staff to find the answers.

If you have ever thought about, or even had questions about rotational grazing, I encourage you to stop by our office or give us a call at 608 742-9670. We are determined to meet our acreage goal, and maybe you will be the one to help us do that!

Let us know if we can help answer any of your questions.