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Summer Grazing

First of all I would like to say that it is good to be back at work after my “vacation” back home. On my last day we moved all of the cattle out to the summer pastures, and with all of the trailers driving around the country, it appeared as though everyone else had the same idea. I’m sure that some of you were also moving cattle out to pasture or have already, but there a few things that you should consider.

There are a few things that you need to keep in mind when grazing cattle on pastures. The first is weed control. Many people spray pastures in the fall to kill off noxious weeds like thistles, but some also do it in spring. If you are going to spray pastures in spring, make sure that you are aware of grazing restrictions and follow the labeled withdrawal period. Many producers don’t even realize that cattle cannot graze for certain periods after pastures have been treated with certain herbicides.

The second factor that needs to be taken into account is pasture diversity. Some pastures have a mix of both warm and cool season grasses and offer more flexibility when it comes to grazing. On the other hand some pastures predominantly consist of either warm season or cool season grasses. It is important that you graze at the appropriate times given the dominant classification of grass. For example, it is best to graze cool season grasses earlier because they will reach maturity soon. On the other hand, cattle should be held off of the warm season grasses until later in the grazing season to allow for growth and energy storage. Grazing forages too

early can have negative affects on root growth, but waiting until after grasses reach maturity and “head out” quality rapidly decreases.

It was nice to have an open winter with very little snow, but that, combined with the lack of spring rains has, Beadle County at below average precipitation for the year. This lack of snow cover and moisture will affect grass growth, pasture yields, and the carrying capacity of your rangeland. Keeping this in mind, the final consideration that needs to be taken into account is that of stock rate. Just because you ran 30 cows on a pasture last year doesn't mean that it can support that many cattle all the time.

Reducing stocking rates doesn't necessarily mean just running less animal units. There are many other options as outlined in SDSU Extension Extra 2033. For starters, cattle can be fed supplemental feed to help reduce pasture intake, but be aware. Supplementing protein can increase the overall digestibility of the forage. The increase in digestibility though could also result in an increase in consumption. Special care and management of the calves is another option. Providing creep feed for the calves can slightly reduce the amount of forage they consume, leaving more for the cows. This of course does have added costs. Also, early weaning of calves has been shown to reduce the forage intake of cows by up to 20%, and is another option if facilities, labor and feed are available. A few more viable options include grazing of cereal grains and frequently rotating pastures. I would hope that the dry spell is only temporary, but if it persists and if worse comes to worse, feeding cattle in a dry lot or selling are other options that may exist.

As land values increase, producers tend to over graze available pastures. Although this practice might get you by in the present, it could lead to reduced stands, lower future production, an increase in weeds, and greater winter kill. All of which can have an effect on the long term

sustainability of your operation. If you have any questions about these or any other topics, please feel free to stop in to the Extension office or give me a call at 353-8436.