

Livestock Weekly Internet Edition April 3, 2008 News	 BAYER MOTOR CO. INC. 218 East Grand • COMANCHE bayer1@itexas.net • www.bayermotor.com 800/843-5230 • 325/356-2541
Columnists	<h2>Plant Control, Not Weight Gain First Goal Of Targeted Grazing</h2> <p>By John Bradshaw</p> <p>ALBUQUERQUE — Targeted grazing is not a new idea, but an older practice that is being revisited and refined around the country. The principle behind this practice is to have a certain type of livestock graze down a specific plant or area to achieve a desired goal.</p> <p>From targeted grazing came a practice that might make most stockmen jealous. Contract grazers are paid by landowners to bring in their goats or sheep to graze areas with different sorts of needs. These grazers achieve positive results, and are paid as much a dollar or more per head per day.</p> <p>Every natural ecosystem around right now either has a problem or is in danger of developing a problem of some sort, said Dr. John Walker, speaking at the recent targeted grazing workshop here. The list of problems is long, and can include anything from invasive species to fire fuel load to a neighbor with problems that might soon cross the fence.</p> <p>Because of all the landscape that needs attention, he explained, the problem can't be addressed with piecemeal solutions. The fire cannot be fought with a garden hose. It is necessary to use livestock to maintain the types of vegetation that are desired.</p> <p>Targeted grazing can be applied on different scales, he said. The first involves grazing to manage vegetation with a profit on the livestock in mind. The second sacrifices livestock performance to achieve the desired landscape goals.</p> <p>“Brush has been invading forever. Newer plants have also</p>
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come in that are problems. We just have a lot of issues with what's on the ground and how we're going to manage them. They're over such vast areas that we can't send bulldozers out, and we can't send people out with backpack sprayers. We need landscape solutions."

The cost of economic damage from invasive plants has been figured at about \$20 billion, he said. From an ecological perspective, invasive plants are one of the biggest destroyers of biodiversity.

Everyone is familiar with the recent wildfires, and Walker said the typical solution is to fight the fires.

"That's what fire people like to do. They really like fires. They may tell you otherwise, but they would really be disappointed if they didn't have a few of those every year. But what about this? Instead of reacting to this stuff, what if we proactively managed our fuel loads?"

He believes that prescribed fire followed up by grazing management will reduce fuel loads to the point where plant communities are not set up for catastrophic wildfires.

Invasive plants reduce the carrying capacity for both livestock and wildlife, and Walker said these invasive species are there because they out-compete other vegetation. One of the main reasons for this is because these species are unpalatable for livestock, and if they are unpalatable for livestock, they are most likely unpalatable for wildlife.

Biological control is one method of controlling invasive species, Walker explained. It is the deliberate use of natural enemies to suppress the target plant. That means the natural enemy of the invasive species, found in the country of origin, is introduced to combat the problem.

"Before we do that, we do years of research on that species or pathogen to be certain that it will only eat that one plant."

A good example of this, he said, is leafy spurge. A number

of insects have been released that have been somewhat successful in controlling it. Many times the biological control used in conjunction with targeted grazing is very effective.

The goal for both biological control and targeted grazing is to reduce the invasive species to an ecologically or economically acceptable level, not to totally eliminate the plant. Walker said he never expects to totally eliminate the targeted plant. Some people believe they can wipe out the problem in a few years, but that is not the case.

“You may get it below that economic threshold in five years, or maybe even less, but if you just stop and go back to the way you were before, you can be assured that the situation will return. Whether it is practicing biological control or targeted grazing, it is an ongoing process.”

Most of the problem plant species are the ones that are avoided by cattle, he explained, and the United States has become more of a cattle society as opposed to sheep or goats.

Walker explained that targeted grazing is the application of a specific kind of livestock at a determined season, duration and intensity to accomplish defined vegetation or landscape goals.

“What we have to do to get that done is first decide what the desired landscape is, where we are today, and where we want to be in several years after initiating this grazing management plan. We have to decide which animals will get us there.”

Targeted grazers must decide which animals have the dietary preferences for the plants that need suppressing, he continued. There are four principles for grazing management, regardless of whether the objective is livestock production or targeted grazing for landscape enhancement.

Stocking rates are the most important part of any grazing plan, Walker said, and he believes that producers across the country are doing a good job of managing these rates properly today. This

was not the case in the past, and many pastures were severely overgrazed.

“A good example of that is around San Angelo, Texas, where I’m from. We have a big reservoir that filled up right after the drouth of the 1950s. It has filled up one other time since then, and has mostly been at about 10 percent of its conservation levels for the last 40 years.”

The reason for this, he explained, is that there is simply much more ground cover to hold the water and slow runoff.

Distribution is another part of grazing that can be controlled. Rotational grazing attempts to spread the distribution of livestock. The season of grazing is also important, particularly in targeted grazing. Instead of set dates for sustaining production, the goal is to turn out livestock when the targeted plant is most susceptible to grazing, whether this is when the plant can most be hurt or when it is it most palatable.

The type of livestock is the other important factor in targeted grazing. Most people, Walker said, are only concerned with what is best for their cattle. They do not consider the possibility of a need for some other sort of stock.

“Really, that is one of our big keys with targeted grazing. We need animals that will graze and prefer the plants that we are trying to control. If these are chemically defended weeds, such as knapweed or leafy spurge, we’d want to use sheep that can eat those plants. If it’s browse, such as juniper, goats might work well, so we need to look at what type of livestock.”

Walker showed a graph of animal numbers over 80 years in the 11 western states. Sheep numbers have steadily gone down, while cattle and weed numbers have gone up. Walker believes the weed numbers have increased because the mixed class livestock operations that were keeping pressure on the weeds have dwindled.

This may not be the only reason for the increase in

undesirable plants, but Walker said the data shows that it is definitely a part of it. Grazing can be both good and bad, depending on how it is done. It can suppress certain plants, or it can increase them.

“We need to be careful about that. With improper grazing we can cause disturbance, and we can open up bare ground for weeds to get established. Livestock can transport seeds, and if we overgraze the native plants, we will reduce their competitive value.”

With many weeds, seed production is their primary method of spreading, he said. If weeds are grazed down at the correct time, seed production can be hurt or stopped, which will ultimately reduce the competitive edge that allows them to take over a plant community.

Weeds aren't all bad, though, Walker noted. Livestock can do well on them, and sheep will do better on leafy spurge than on weed-free pastures.

“The overall goal is to have the knowledge of animal husbandry so that we use the animal the best we can, and the knowledge of plant ecology so that we can put the plants at their worst. We can kind of stack the deck in our favor.”

Walker explained that certain contract grazing projects, where a landowner pays someone to bring in sheep or goats for a set time period to graze down undesirable plants, can be expensive, as much as one dollar or more per head per day.

On the other hand, the costs of targeted grazing programs conducted by landowners may be low or even positive. He said most cattle operations can add one sheep for every five head of cattle without affecting cattle production. This will add revenue and decrease weed encroachment.

There are costs associated with targeted grazing, such as loss of productivity, fencing, and management costs. Those in the business of contract grazing have many costs, including the cost of

feeding their livestock for the remainder of the year when they do not have grazing contracts.

“So there is a whole scale on the way targeted grazing can be managed. Really, what differentiates it is we’re thinking about managing the landscape and managing the vegetation first.

“The overall benefits far outweigh the negatives. It can be highly effective; that has been demonstrated in numerous projects. It is environmentally friendly, which is encouraging to a lot of people, and we can start converting these weeds into a product.”

Walker ended by showing a photo taken in 1916. The photo showed several ewes and lambs grazing the White House lawn. Woodrow Wilson used the sheep because he did not want able-bodied men mowing the lawn when they could have been supporting the war effort.

“George Bush wants to cut back on our fuel consumption, and I’d like to see him go back to bio-energy-based lawnmowers instead of what they’re using now,” Walker concluded.

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