Lost Rivers Grazing Academy Makes a Difference for Livestock Producers

The Situation

Feed cost is the single greatest expense in raising livestock. Quite often feed cost represents more than 50% of the total cost of raising livestock. Animals typically graze pastures during the spring, summer and fall months. Mechanically harvested feeds (baled hay, silage, etc.) traditionally make up the majority of the feed fed to livestock during the non-growing (winter) season. Livestock producers habitually find themselves in the paradigm of grazing animals while the pastures are green and then feeding hay the remainder of the time.

Grazing standing forage is the least expensive option for meeting livestock nutritional needs. However, livestock producers are often limited in the number of animals they can sustain in an operation by the amount of forage that is produced in their pastures. This forage production is frequently less than 50% of potential due to poor production and poor harvesting efficiency.

Pasture operators lack motivation to improve management because: 1) conventional management has traditionally been viewed as adequate; 2) pastures appear to be more resilient to abuse than other crops; 3) land typically planted to domestic pasture is perceived as marginal and therefore of limited financial value; and 4) producers have not recognized the ecological value of pastures.

The cost of mechanically harvested feed has risen sharply with increases in the cost of fuel, fertilizer, equipment, and supplies. Producers who rely heavily on these feeds have experienced increased operating costs and reduced profits.

Our Response

To improve the sustainability of livestock operations, thirteen four-day hands-on workshops for livestock producers have been held across southern Idaho. Topics covered in the intensive four-day, hands-on workshop include the five principles of grazing, tools for managing grazing, anatomy and physiology of forage plants, grazing cell design, low stress livestock handling techniques, and livestock health considerations to name a few. Participants in these workshops have come away with a better understanding of the principles involved and have put what they learned into practice on their livestock operations. This growing network of operators are developing, adopting and implementing more economically efficient and environmentally acceptable methods for harvesting and utilizing forages.

Program Outcomes

Through 2008, over 200 participants from 12 states, Mexico, and Canada have participated in the program. Several producers have attended more than once. One producer has attended six times, stating that he learns more with each session, both from new insight on the material as well as from the new participants in the class.

Lost River Grazing Academy participants have indicated a high level of satisfaction with the knowledge gained while attending the grazing
school. Evaluation comments such as “This class exceeded my expectations. I was hoping to learn about grazing. Instead I learned about managing our operation, the plants, and the cattle.”, “This is easily the best workshop I have been to and if you put on an advanced course, count me in.” And, “My expectations were met very well. I came here hoping to learn a little bit about everything while highlighting the areas more pertinent to our place and operation. This class did a superb job of doing just that.”

Specific outcomes are presented in the following two case studies and information from a survey of past participants.

**Case Study 1:** Prior to implementation of a Management-intensive Grazing (MiG) system, a ranch in central Idaho generated 150-160 cow days/acre (CDA) on a 150 acre pivot. A MiG system was installed in 2005 and that year the pivot produced 189 CDA. In 2006 it produced 220 CDA. Conservatively valuing the grazing at 60 cents per day for 50 additional days of grazing is worth 30 additional dollars per acre.

This ranch also has a 300 acre pivot that is used for one cutting of hay and then stockpiled and/or grazed partially in late summer. In 2004 with 100 acres in barley-oats-winter peas, it was strip grazed and produced 290 CDA at a feed cost of $0.29/head/day. In the past this crop would have been mechanically harvested with the baled hay fed to cattle starting November 1. The pasture was grazed by 428 cows from September 17th to December 15th. Four hundred additional cows from the same ranch were fed hay during this period at a cost of $1.33/head/day. Hay feeding costs were $93.60/head higher than those grazing during this 90 day period. This translates to an additional $37,440 in feed cost for 400 head of cattle for the 90 day period.

**Case Study 2:** A “traditional” rancher in central Idaho was “cut off” by his banker when he went to borrow money to put up his hay. Faced with changing the way he did things or finding a different profession, this producer decided to implement management-intensive grazing strategies that he had learned previously by attending the Lost Rivers Grazing Academy. He grazed “hay” meadows early and then stockpiled them for grazing use in the fall and winter. Hay needs for his 250 cow herd were reduced about 65% by utilizing the stockpiled feed. In four years time he has paid off $200,000 in debt. He is now working to change the genetics of his herd and the time of his calving season to better fit a MiG program.

**LRGA Participant Survey:** In 2005, past Lost Rivers Grazing Academy participants were surveyed to determine implementation of MiG principles. Frequency data indicate that the number of animals being grazed by reporting producers increased by 1,189 head. This equates to an average of 25 additional animals per producer. These producers also indicate that 5,807 additional acres are now under a managed grazing system. The total number of days grazed increased by 32%. Respondents also reported 1) a decrease in the number of weeds, 2) fertilizer costs remaining the same or declining, 3) a decrease in animal health costs and 4) a decrease in their winter feeding costs. And finally, the true measure of success of the program, respondents reported an increase in their bottom line.

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