

IMPACT



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Pasture Management for Beginners

The Situation

The American dream for many residents in the Treasure Valley of Idaho is to purchase a small piece of rural property on which to raise their families along with a few horses, cattle, and/or other animals. The vast majority of these new small acreage landowners have very limited if any experience with the various aspects of proper pasture management.

Most beginning pasture managers look for simple “quick fix” solutions to problems. They think that planting the perfect grass variety or spraying the pasture with the “right” herbicide will solve all of the problems they are experiencing. The vast majority of beginning pasture managers also have unrealistic expectations of the number of animals that an acre of pasture can support. At one class, a participant expressed that he was taking the class to learn how to make a living on his five acres so that he could quit his full-time job.

Other beginning pasture managers have some experience, but lack the necessary knowledge of how to improve the existing condition of the pasture or deal with some of the challenges such as weed invasion or irrigation problems that crop up. They are readily seeking information to improve their management skills.

Our Response

In the spring of 2000, University of Idaho extension educators in Ada and Canyon counties developed a short course and assembled a notebook of reference materials to teach basic pasture management skills to beginning pasture managers. The pasture management short course was originally started as a

Friday evening/all day Saturday course. In response to evaluation comments, the short course was lengthened in 2003 to include a Thursday evening session and a Saturday afternoon pasture tour.

The subject area that are included in the pasture management course include:

- *Goal setting and pasture planning.* This is an exercise designed to get pasture managers to look at what they have to work with and to establish some realistic goals for what they want to accomplish.
- *Grass varieties and seed selection.* This portion of the course is designed to help pasture managers have a better understanding of what grass varieties can be grown in this area and how to make a choice on what to plant.
- *Soils and fertilizer.* The soils portion provides students with background information that will help them better understand plant and irrigation limitations. Participants also learn the importance of soil testing and how to take a representative soil sample to submit for analysis.
- *Irrigation.* This section helps to increase the course participants’ knowledge of irrigation needs and options.
- *Weed control.* This portion helps students to understand the importance of weed identification in weed control. It also increases awareness of the options available for effective weed control.
- *Grazing management.* This section attempts to put all of the pieces (goals, soils, grass, irrigation, weed control) together. Participants learn how each item is related and the basics of how to manage grazing to maximize production.

Program Outcomes

At the conclusion of the classes, participants were asked to complete a short evaluation. While all of the evaluations of the program indicated that the program was good and that it met or exceeded their expectations, the planned changes in pasture management are of more interest. Attendees of the beginning pasture management classes indicated their plan to make the following changes:

- Divide the pasture into sub-units (paddocks) to better control animal grazing and to allow portions of the pasture to “rest.”
- Improve weed management through proper identification and control methods.
- Soil test to determine needed nutrients.
- Planning and goal setting prior to taking action.

Additionally, follow-up with some of the participants have given some actual individual outcomes as a result of the class.

Prior to the class, Steve Deis had improperly identified the grasses present in his pasture and adjacent field that is harvested for grass hay. Thinking that the grasses present were undesirable, Steve had planned to plow them out and start over. After properly identifying the grasses as orchard grass and tall fescue, Steve realized that he had exactly what he wanted, negating the expense of reworking and replanting the pasture. He also installed gated pipe for irrigation replacing a problem-ridden dirt ditch and corrugated the field to improve water distribution.

Participants Michael Leaverton and Dena Smallwood subdivided their pasture into two sections and rotated their animals to allow one section to be at rest at any given time. They saw increased forage production and reduced weed problems.

As additional people move from an urban to a more rural setting, they will be looking for help in learning to manage the properties that they purchase. With the majority of those people planning to raise some type of livestock on pasture, the University of Idaho beginning pasture management course provides them with a better understanding and some of the tools necessary to become better pasture managers.

Collaborators

University of Idaho, Canyon County Extension
University of Idaho, Ada County Extension
University of Idaho, Owyhee County Extension
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
D&B Supply
Producers Supply Co-op

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