Improving Pasture Profitability

**Situation:**
Butte County is a high elevation farming and livestock production area. In the more recent past, under the influence of the USDA farm programs, farm operators gravitated toward the production of cash grain crops. Although cereals, particularly barley can be profitably grown in the Lost Rivers Valleys, the likelihood of early, mid and late season frost, as well as severe hail storms increase the “environmental” hazards of cereal production. In addition, current trend in financing of farm subsidy programs is to lower payments to cereal producers, and the market price of cereals will not support the environmental risks. Most operators simply cannot afford the machinery and other purchased inputs necessary to grow a profitable crop in 2 out of 3 or 3 out of 5 years.

Butte & Custer counties form a significant cow-calf livestock production area. Current trend in government policy with respect to the use of public lands for grazing has many livestock operators searching for ways to replace their spring and summer feed resources.

**Our Response:**
Operators in other parts of the US and particularly in New Zealand have long been proponents of “Intensive Grazing Management” or “Management Intensive Grazing” (MIG). This is a management philosophy that focuses on improving the capture and conversion of solar energy to salable animal products with lowered purchased inputs and the highest economic conversion efficiencies. MIG focuses on increased management and understanding of the economic, physical and biological systems that farm operators manipulate, while reducing off-farm purchased inputs.

Since little of this activity has been done in Idaho, and the process focuses on livestock as harvesting equipment rather than the direct product, many operators are interested, but reluctant to “jump in” to MIG. We have been working with two interested operators to set up demonstration grazing cells, plant materials demonstrations and operator workshops that focus on developing an understanding of the physical, biological and economic systems grazers manage.
Achievements:

We have worked closely with two operators who have invested in the MIG philosophy to help them learn to operate their systems. In return, these individuals have cooperated in conducting applied field research and workshops for other operators. A one day workshop was held in 1993 and attended by 15 operators. As a result of the 1993 workshop, two additional operators began MIG grazing cells in 1994.

In 1994 we conducted a 2 day workshop that included field activities to help operators evaluate their own pasture situation, and determine the intensity of management they could economically achieve. The 1994 workshop was attended by 30 operators including out-of-area individuals.

Results of our pasture growth rate studies indicate that pasture productivity can be in excess of 100 lb. of dry matter/ac./day, and can result in gains of stocker cattle in excess of 2 lb./animal per day at a stocking rates of as high as four 500 lb. calves per acre. At these conversion rates, 2000 to 2500 lb. of beef can be produced per acre, with a gross value of $1300 and $1600 per acre. This compares favorably with barley with a gross revenue of only $200-$300 per acre.

While production expenses for irrigated pasture are well below those of barley, and machinery expenses (direct and capital) are considerably lower, advanced financial management, production management and livestock marketing management skills are required to make an individual MIG system profitable.

The Future

We will continue to work with individual operators, and give workshops covering the principles of MIG. In addition, in 1995, we will be establishing a plant materials trial to examine and demonstrate conventional and non-conventional forage species and varieties in our local environment.

Cooperators and Co-sponsors:

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Jack Jensen, Jensen Livestock, Arco
Dr. Kleal and Susan Hill, Lost River Veterinary Clinic, Arco
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