

Flexible Grazing

Background

Almost every year some areas of Texas experience drought conditions at some level. For most of us, we don't think about drought in a year when we have received above normal rainfall totals, we tend to start thinking of drought when the rain stops and the drought is upon us. It is at this point in time when producers stop thinking about the fat calves that they weaned last year and begin thinking about how to operate and stay sustainable economically and ecologically in times of drought and low forage production. One piece of the puzzle to enduring drought situations and remaining productive is to be flexible in your operation. In most parts of the state drought situations are nothing new to the livestock producer. With these types of swings and shifts in the carrying capacities on our rangelands, it is wise for a producer to be ready to take advantage of an abundance of grass when available or be ready to liquidate when necessary in a timely manner.



Process



First, you must calculate the carrying capacity of the land and then determine proper stocking rate. By running a combination of cow/calves and stocker cattle, a producer can take advantage of years of excess forage production and reduce herd size in less than ideal years. 50% of your total animal units could be composed of a cow/calf herd, and the other 50% could be composed of a stocker cattle herd that you can sell first in bad years before you have to get down to the cow/calf herd, or buy more in good years when you have an abundance of grass. Realistically you could work this combination of animal units any way you wanted to but the less mother cows you have in your herd, the more flexible you become. This system will allow a producer to take care of his country by eliminating mouths from the land without having to give up his entire breeding herd, in most years and situations. This type of system can also work very well with thin cows in the place of stockers, especially when a bull is turned out with them.

Summary

Remember, although this type of a system allows for flexibility in the management and decision making in regards to a livestock herd, there are still going to be some years when a total liquidation of all animals may be necessary. As mentioned before, this strategy is only one piece of the puzzle to be being able to remain sustainable year in and year out, in the good times and the bad. Other pieces of the puzzle include knowing the proper stocking rate of your county to begin with and monitoring rainfall to be able to be proactive in your decisions to acquire or liquidate livestock. Drought situations and overgrazing our Texas rangelands can be very detrimental to the economic and ecological sustainability of our ranching economy. With a couple of new strategies that incorporate flexibility and being proactive into a management system we can minimize the effects of drought on our operations and enhance the sustainability and productivity of the operations over the long term.



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*Providing Leadership for the
Stewardship of Rangelands
Based on Sound Ecological
Principles*

