

Grazing the Intensive Way

Jason Smith, Greenfield, Illinois

Year-Round Management Intensive Grazing

Coordinator: Jason Smith

Location: Greenfield, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$5,820

Grant Year: 2002

Project Number: FNC02-409

Jason Smith used management-intensive grazing to extend the grazing season from five months per year to nine. He also reduced feed costs by \$.90 per head per day.

Some say it is better to be lucky than good. But when Jason Smith extended the grazing season for his cow-calf beef operation from five months per year to nine, he was a little bit of both.

In 2002, while Smith was in the planning stages of implementing a management-intensive grazing system on 80 acres of previously cropped land, he received a well-timed SARE grant.

"The grant came at an opportune time to move forward with the plans," says Smith, who farms 480 acres in Macoupin County. But although the timing may have been fortuitous, the success of the project was much more than blind luck. It was carefully thought out.

Management-intensive grazing requires that cattle be moved from paddock to paddock, allowing the plants in each paddock to recover and produce new growth after it has been grazed.

"Management-intensive grazing has definite profit advantages over row crops," says Smith. "However, it is a system that requires a significant outlay of funds for fencing, watering, and forage seed. It also requires a good deal of time and physical labor."

By extending the grazing season for his 45 beef cows, Smith's goal was to increase profits through reduced hay feed costs



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in the winter. This is important because, according to Jim Gerrish of the University of Missouri Forage Systems Research Center, winter hay feeding is one of the two greatest single-item budget line costs in most cow-calf operations. (The other big item is land costs.) Gerrish also says that in areas on a line south of Springfield, Illinois, "The reason most cows don't graze in the winter is lack of pasture, not excessive snow cover."

By extending his cattle's grazing season four months, Smith was able to reduce feed costs by \$.90 per head per day. However, he says they have not yet been able to get the grazing season to extend beyond November.

To implement this system, Smith installed a five-strand, high-tensile fence around 80 acres of land. Then, using a two-wire, high-tensile fence, he divided the acreage into seven paddocks. Smith let the animals graze one paddock until it was almost grazed down, and then he moved them to the next one.

Smith used most of the grant money to install two automatic, frost-free watering systems located near the center of the 80 acres. The system pumped water roughly 1,300 feet from the nearest pond. The

cattle, meanwhile, were within a walking distance of at most 800 feet from the watering systems.

"The terrain is pretty rugged," says Smith. "There weren't a lot of choices for location, but this way the cows have easy access to it."

Smith seeded orchardgrass on 60 acres of the plot, and on the other 20 acres, he seeded a mixture of rye, oats, and turnips. The 80 acres had previously been seeded with corn, but according to Smith, it did not yield well because of erosion.

The gross revenue for the 45 beef cows during the grant period was \$21,000. The estimated gross revenue for the same land planted to corn yielding 100 bushels per acre at the price then of \$2 per bushel was \$16,000.

Today, Smith has continued management-intensive grazing, only now he has about 90 head of beef cattle. And although he was one of the first to introduce the extended grazing system in his area, he's seeing a lot more interest.

"Managed grazing is not only economically advantageous, but it also helps to control erosion better than cropped land," says Smith. "It is a profitable and worthwhile endeavor."

By Jason Peterson