

Livestock Production

Find extra grass on ranch

BY LORETTA SORENSEN

WHEN Charlie Totton, Chamberlain, S.D., wanted to increase the grazing period on his ranch from six months to 10 months, he immediately ran up against a roadblock. There wasn't much pasture to buy or rent in his area. He had to find more grass at home.

That's when he turned to mob grazing. Over the past six years, he's learned how to use his cattle to improve the quality and quantity of his grasses, double his grazing days, and reduce feed costs and labor.

He started the project with a close look at what was already on his grassland.

"Western wheat grass dominated our uplands, and big bluestem grew in lower areas. Our warm-season grasses didn't have much vigor," Totton says. "They were damaged from season-long grazing. In some places brome grass was encroaching on our land. I knew we weren't making the most out of the abundant cool-season grasses we had. By the time cattle finished grazing them, they were losing quality and

Key Points

- South Dakota rancher uses mob grazing to increase forage base.
- Cows graze brome grass, Kentucky bluegrass early in season.
- Early grazing increases native grass production later in the year.

palatability. So we based the first part of our grazing plan on the fact that we did have abundant cool-season grass."

After a careful survey of his property, Totton selected about 740 of his 3,200 acres that were suitable for mob grazing. He fenced off four 160-acre permanent paddocks with high-tensile steel, single-wire electric fence.

Because he had plenty of cool-season grass, his plan was to flash-graze all four paddocks in May, and graze two of the four paddocks during June, July and August. The other two 160-acre pastures rested through the summer and were grazed in winter.

Throughout May, his 200-head cow-calf herd grazed each 160-acre plot for about one week. The idea was to get cattle to graze Kentucky bluegrass and smooth brome, leaving warm-season varieties to develop further. By watching cattle closely, Totton could see when they started grazing western wheatgrass and move them into the next pasture.

What Totton observed with his flash grazing system was that warm-season native grasses actually produced more forage later in the season after being lightly grazed in May. Hoof action trampled significant amounts of organic material into each pasture, helping reduce soil moisture evaporation and feeding soil microbial activity during the growing season.

"We found that if we grazed brome

grass a couple times in spring, it didn't seed out nearly as much," Totton says. "About 90% of the brome we grazed stayed leafier and greener longer into the summer, providing better grazing later in the season. By stunting lower-quality grasses with flash grazing, we find there's more moisture and nutrients available later on for warm-season grass. It can be challenging to flash-graze those early grasses when you're not certain how much rainfall the season will bring, but it's proved to work well."

By June 1, Totton implements his summer grazing strategy, keeping cattle on 4-acre paddocks created with polywire, and moving them each day. By the end of August, he has taken cattle through two of the four 160-acre pastures.

Come September, Totton moves cattle to rougher terrain, where paddocks are significantly larger and cattle graze in one area much longer.

In October, Totton organizes his across-the-fence weaning plan, leaving calves and cows on grassland. Over winter, Totton's cattle graze larger paddocks on rougher terrain. If winter weather becomes too severe, he provides hay supplements harvested from 300 acres of his own hay ground.

By annually grazing two of the four 160-acre pastures during the growing season, Totton gives both warm-season and cool-season plants in the other two pastures adequate opportunity to use leaves to harvest sunlight and feed, strengthen and expand their root system. The rest period also provides undisturbed wildlife habitat.

"I've learned from range specialists that resting grassland is only effective if it's done during the growing season, when temperatures and moisture levels allow grass to grow and rejuvenate," Totton



PLANT DIVERSITY: A tour group looks for different species of grass in Charlie Totton's pasture. More than 100 different plants have been found.

NRCS helps monitor grazing

IN developing his grazing system, Charlie Totton relied on input and expertise from South Dakota Natural Resources Conservation Service rangeland management specialists Mitch Faulkner and Stanley Boltz. They visited Totton's ranch and helped him gather scientific data to support the results he believed he was seeing from his grazing plan.

"One of the things Charlie has done well is target invasive grasses, like Kentucky bluegrass and smooth brome," Faulkner says.

"His strategy has promoted the return of tall, warm-season native grasses that remain productive as the growing season progresses. It seems Charlie is always looking for opportunity and is willing to evaluate, assess and monitor his grazing activities to refine his beef production vision."

Boltz notes that both grass diversity and vigor are stimulated through intense grazing. He and Faulkner counted more than 100 different plants in Totton's pastures.

"I believe we've balanced our grazing activities, not overgrazing or leaving land to become a weedy, matted mess," Totton says. "I've reached some of my goals, but I'll keep learning and exploring, using what I have and managing for what I want."

— Loretta Sorensen

says. "That's why I stay off two of my pastures every summer. You're not wasting that grass, because cattle graze those paddocks during winter."

Since about 85% of his grassland rests every growing season, he's improving all 3,200 acres. "Only a portion of my grassland works with a mob grazing system," Totton says, "but we've seen many benefits from our grazing strategy."

More information about Totton and his ranch is available at tottonangus.com.

Sorensen is from Yankton, S.D.

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