

GRAZING NETWORKS FOR LIVESTOCK PRODUCERS

CURRENT TOPIC

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April 2002

Introduction

Grazing networks are groups of farmers and ranchers who work together to increase their knowledge of forage management, pasture-based production, and farm economics. Grazing networks promote a mutual self-help approach to learning, in which each member is both student and teacher. The members share their experiences and offer advice to one another, organize educational events around their common interests, and spend some time socializing. Members of grazing networks usually find that what they learn from other farmers and ranchers is timely, practical, and profitable. They also find within the network a spirit of community and support that, while intangible, many see as crucial to sustaining the life of family farms.

Background

Farmers in New Zealand, especially dairy farmers, started forming grazing networks more than 40 years ago. Grazing techniques developed there, such as management-intensive grazing (MIG, or management-intensive rotational grazing, MiRG), have become cornerstones for the grazing networks that have taken root in the US since the 1980s. Grazing networks now exist throughout this country and are especially active in the Midwest, where Wisconsin, for example, claims 23 networks serving farmers in 51 of the state's 72 counties (1).



Photo by Bill Murphy, 1995
Courtesy of Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN)

Pasture walks help dairy producers learn skills in managing forage-based production.

Becoming Part of a Grazing Network

The easiest way to get involved with a grazing network is to join one. Many county Extension agents coordinate grazing networks, or at least know of any networks active in their areas. But if there are none, you can start one.

Most grazing networks get started simply enough, when three or four graziers start talking about their common problems or concerns and decide to pool their knowledge to help one another out. Reaching others who may be interested in becoming part of the network is usually done by word of mouth or through targeted mailings (2). In either case, someone must take on the job of doing the initial leg work and coordinating the organizational meeting.

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If you do not know other graziers in your area, your Extension agent, local veterinarians, or someone at the feed store can probably help you put together a list. When you call people on your list to invite them to your first meeting, be prepared to answer their questions about what you're doing and why. Keep it simple and direct. "Farmers usually say they attended their first group meeting because they were asked personally" (2).

If personal or telephone contact isn't practical for you, the next-best recruitment tool is a targeted mailing to a list of potential members. "Targeted" is the key word here. Try to identify farmers and ranchers whom you believe may have an interest in managing their pastures for greater profit. In your mailing (as well as in direct contacts), be sure to make clear the purpose and philosophy behind the group and to include the names of others who will be at the meeting. "Many farmers ... attended the first meeting because they knew they would have an opportunity to meet and talk with other farmers they respect" (2).

A lot of what it takes to host an organizational meeting is common sense. Schedule it at a convenient time. Have an agenda that allows for plenty of feedback from the participants. Have someone taking notes. Provide refreshments.

One important decision that you need to make early in the formation of your group is whether it will be open to anyone interested or whether its membership will be limited. Both open memberships and closed memberships have their individual strengths and weaknesses.

Networks with an open membership are usually larger than closed-membership groups and sometimes require a more formal structure to keep them running. Larger groups do offer a greater diversity of ideas and experiences than those with closed memberships, and there are more people to assist new members in understanding how the network operates. But the diversity of open-membership groups is their greatest strength, in the view of many who advocate them (3, 4).

On the other hand, the larger size of most open groups, with their ever-shifting dynamics and greater demand for coordination, tends to make them less cohesive than smaller networks. Also, large meetings, with their more formal structure, limit the depth in which a topic can be discussed (2).

The smaller size of most networks with closed membership has its own appeal. Aside from usually having a more informal structure and requiring less energy to coordinate and maintain, closed networks allow their members to get to know one another better, to form strong relationships, and to focus their activities more easily on topics of mutual interest. As Jason Rankin, a networker from County Down in Northern Ireland, says, "If you get ten committed members then that is plenty" (5). One disadvantage of a smaller group is that the number and variety of ideas within it will be more limited (2). Another shortcoming is that smaller networks demand a stronger commitment from their members. If only three members of a nine-farm network are actively involved, the group is in trouble.

The size of your group, whether open or closed membership, will largely determine how it functions and how much effort is necessary to keep it vital. But regardless of size, no grazing network runs by itself. There has to be leadership and some method of governance.

While Extension agents do act as coordinators for some grazing networks, the "leadership should really come from within the group . . . [and] members themselves must lead the network" (6). "This is in fact the heart of a grazing network: **the experts are the ones doing it, and the ones doing it**

are the farmers” (3). Someone has to take responsibility for calling and running meetings, contacting members, arranging for guest speakers, organizing pasture walks and pot-luck dinners. In a small group, this may be an individual or, in a larger group, a body of officers. In either case, leadership and coordination are crucial to a network’s success.

Just as there are open (usually large) and closed (usually smaller) membership groups, there are also formal and informal ways of running them. Formal structures – with elected officers and meetings run by some established rules of order – are usually better suited to larger groups. Indeed, a very large group may require a formal structure to avoid chaos. But not always. The Grassroots Grazing Group (see **Case Study** below) still maintains a very informal structure, even though it has grown from its original 13 members by more than six fold. Smaller groups, on the other hand, those with no more than 10 to 15 members, can usually function well with just a few ground rules and someone willing to see that everyone knows when and where they’re to meet. Smaller groups may be able to act swiftly and make decisions by consensus, although the danger for groups making decisions by consensus is “the tendency to make compromises just to move the consensus along” (2).

Regardless of the method of governance your network chooses, the person in charge has several very important obligations to the group. Let’s call the person in charge “the coordinator.”

The coordinator’s first (and ongoing) task is to find out what the group is interested in, what topics or problems or activities it most wants to explore. Obviously, there will be some areas of common concern that brought the group together in the first place, but the coordinator must ensure that fresh ideas and new concerns are given fair consideration. Of course, members should be free to introduce topics or suggest activities at any time, but it is the coordinator’s role to poll the membership and find out where its greatest interests lie. In a small group, it might take no more than asking, “What are you folks interested in?” In a larger group, it may be necessary to use a more formal poll, followed by a vote.

Once a coordinator has determined what the network members want to discuss, he or she can start setting the agendas for meetings. This may seem no more than note taking, just a list of things to talk about, but it serves a function critical to making meetings go well: bringing them to a good end. Members can read a published agenda and come to meetings prepared to ask questions or make comments focused on the issues at hand. The agenda also helps the coordinator keep meetings on-track and gets the members to the coffee and cake or the pot-luck dinner they’ve been waiting for a little faster.

Once the coordinator has an agenda, the next step is scheduling. Meetings, pasture walks, guest lectures, field demonstrations – all these must be held at times when the greatest number of members can attend. Again, common sense goes a long way when drawing up a schedule. Don’t schedule in the middle of a weekday during haying season or when some popular community event (the Big Game, the Mouse Milking Derby, etc.) is taking place.

The coordinator has not only to decide when things happen but also what. Based on the interests of the members, the coordinator will have to arrange for speakers (often from Extension, another grazing group, or a university), set up demonstrations, and see to it that there are activities for children at the events.

Finally, perhaps the single most important job for the coordinator is to make sure that members get the information they need about meetings and activities, and that they get it far enough in advance

to work it into their schedules. Telephone calls, e-mails, newsletters, public service announcements on local TV and radio stations, can all make the coordinator's job easier and the coordinator more effective.

Sustaining the Network

The members of a grazing network need to share a belief in a set of clearly stated goals that not only address immediate, pragmatic concerns – improving pastures, boosting production, and increasing profits for the members – but also reflect the members' social, environmental, and personal aspirations. The success of a network depends upon the success of each individual in it, and vice versa. This means the network has to be more than just a forum for practical matters; it must also be an integral part of the lives of the members. Wayne Burleson, a grazier and Holistic Management Certified Educator from Absarokee, Montana, says of his grazing group, “[it is] part friendship, part support, part family, and part business” (7). And, as a study of the Missouri Green Hills Farm Project discovered, “. . . the group's goals represent a mix of social, economic, and environmental objectives” (4).

Shared goals and aspirations give focus and direction to the group. They are the philosophical glue that binds network members together. And they provide a framework of support within which members can work to realize their individual ambitions.

The essence of grazing networks is farmer-to-farmer learning and support. But monthly meetings or pasture walks or pot-luck suppers aren't always enough to keep the members in touch, especially when one of them needs help with a problem right now. A directory of members, with phone numbers, addresses, and e-mail addresses, makes it much easier for members to contact one another. An e-mail listserve provides a venue for ongoing discussions as well as fast access to information. The Grassroots Grazing Group – which has more than 80 member-families in Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma – operates a listserve (moderated through ATTRA) that its members use regularly. As one GGG farmer puts it: “The listserve is invaluable in allowing me to get timely answers to questions necessary for management of forages, nutrients, livestock, and pests” (8).

Shared goals and ready communication are fundamental to getting a network going, but there's even more to keeping one going. Andy Hager, Extension agent in Taylor County, Wisconsin, who coordinates more than 250 farms in the Northcentral Graziers Network, believes there are three things that make a network work: mentoring, flexibility, and creativity (3).

Mentoring is the practice of pairing an experienced grazier with a beginner – farmer-to-farmer learning at its purest – and it addresses one of the common challenges that grazing groups face: how to accommodate the different needs of both beginning and advanced graziers. It allows new members to integrate more easily into the group, while they at the same time reap practical benefits from the knowledge and experience of the veteran. But perhaps more importantly, it helps established members to “learn twice, by teaching” (9), and keeps them involved in the crucial agricultural endeavor of raising new crops of farmers.

“Flexibility” and “creativity” are more difficult to quantify. They may grow naturally out of the group's diversity or be reflective of the group's leadership. Whatever their source, an openness to new ideas and the urge to improve upon old ones are important qualities for sustaining the vitality of a network. But they show their worth best in the activities that the network sponsors.

No activity is more representative of how grazing groups work than the pasture walk. As we'll discuss later, pasture walks can have a lot of variety, but one general description sums them up

reasonably well: “Pasture Walks involve other graziers. They serve as constructive critics, extra sets of observing eyes, fellow commiserators, question-raisers, and most importantly these people are genuinely interested – dedicated to making grazing work better on everyone’s farms” (8).

A pasture walk can involve more than just walking a member’s pasture and assessing its health, needs, and use, but that is the core of the activity. In many grazing networks, pasture walks (and the pot-luck dinner following them) are a major part of the monthly meetings of the group from spring until winter.

The Grassroots Grazing Group provides its members with an outline for hosting a pasture walk (8). According to the GGG literature, the following are important considerations for a successful walk.



*Plan the pot-luck meal well in advance and let the other members know what kinds of dishes they should bring.

*Be sure everyone knows exactly when and where the walk will take place. If the location is difficult to find, provide maps and instructions on how to get there.

*Plan the tour to focus on successes or challenges. Have questions ready for the group concerning any specific problems you may be facing.

*Introduce your farm or pasture with a brief history of the place. How long have you had this farm? When did you get involved with controlled grazing? What are the other farm enterprises? In other words, provide as much useful background information as possible about how the pasture has been used in the past and how you would like to use it in the future.

*Have a map of the property that shows its basic features:

- soil types
- land contours
- water sources
- forage species
- special-use pastures

*Prepare information about your fertility and grazing-management systems.

*If you have a lot of ground to cover, provide a hayrack or truck to transport the group.

*Discuss what each of you saw and thought.

*Enjoy your meal.

In grazing networks that have been operating for a few years, pasture walks tend to take on a certain sameness (11), and the groups look to diversify their activities. They often invite guest speakers (12) from Extension, the university, or another grazing group. They may form discussion groups

(13) or create problem-solving exercises (14) that address broader farm issues such as costs, management, or budgets. Other activities many groups use to keep things interesting include field research trials and on-farm demonstrations of new practices or technologies (2).

The social component of grazing groups is vital to their sustainability (6, 8). Farmers have long days, and sometimes it feels like there are eight of them a week. Farmsteads may be far apart, and farm life often leaves little time for a social life, let alone meeting new people. Being a member of a grazing group not only provides farmers with practical information, it also creates a social circle of like-minded folks who gather regularly both to discuss their common interests and to have fun. “There must be a balance between formal discussion and socialization,” says Tom Wrchota, a grazier from Wisconsin, who adds, “I received much more out of the group than what I put into it” (15).

Case Study: Grassroots Grazing Group

The Grassroots Grazing Group (GGG) began in 1997, with a gathering of farmers, ranchers, and educators at the farm of John and Becky Spain in Hindsville, Arkansas. After some discussion of their common interests, the group made the decision to form a grazing network and to look for funding to help support their start-up efforts. Working through NCAT/ATTRA, GGG applied for and received an EPA Sustainable Development Challenge Grant. In January, 1998, the 13 founding member families signed their mission statement and paid their dues. Since then, GGG has grown to more than 80 member families.

Regular — usually monthly — pasture walks are a central feature of GGG activities. The group will meet at a member family’s farm and, after a brief orientation by the owner, tour the operation, looking at the pasture, livestock, and equipment. Following the tour, the members discuss what they’ve observed over a pot-luck dinner, and after dinner hold a short business meeting. Some members have also organized field trips to The Stockman Grassfarmer Conference and to nearby research farms. A favorite activity of GGG is to meet at a beginning grazier’s farm and discuss how best to set up its grazing system. Three teams, each composed of both experienced and beginning graziers, walk the new member’s pasture, discuss what they see, and draw up three different proposals for consideration. This has proved beneficial not only to the newcomer but to the old hands as well. They all realize how much they know and how much they have to contribute to the group. After using this three-team approach to help design his own pasture operation, one beginning grazier said, “Had it not been for the things I have just begun to implement, I have serious doubts I would have made it through this drought.”

When Networks Break Down

Nothing lasts forever — although an argument could be made for Spam — and grazing networks are no different. Energy wanes, enthusiasm slackens, discord arises among the members, who complain of lack of leadership, lack of new ideas, or lack of communication (6). Organizations all have their natural life cycles and go through similar phases (2). At some point, any grazing network will have to face the fact that it’s just not working as well as it could, that members are suffering burn-out and are not bringing the same level of energy and vitality to the group that they once did (11). A grazing network at this point in its life may be ill, but it is far from dead.

Revitalizing a network may mean going back to basics, looking at its stated goals or mission statement, and seeing whether these goals still meet the needs of the members (2). Some networks choose to subdivide into smaller groups with specialized interests (16), while others opt to focus the entire

network on advanced issues (11). As mentioned above, guest speakers, discussion groups, mentoring, and social events can all help to pump life into a network. It's here that the principles of flexibility and creativity will need to be called upon.

If, despite all your efforts, the group doesn't have the collective will to continue, accept the inevitable and disband, taking with you all the knowledge and friendships that the network has brought to you.

Conclusion

Establishing and maintaining a grazing network is challenging. It demands leadership, commitment, time, energy, and creativity. And balancing the different needs and expectations of the members will be an ongoing task. Being an active member of a grazing group – the only kind to be, if you expect to get the most from it – is not a casual activity.

That hard work and dedication will, however, be rewarded. The example of New Zealand and the growth in popularity of grazing networks in the US is proof that they work. The educational, social, and economic benefits that farmers discover in grazing groups far outweigh the effort necessary to make them work.

NCAT/ATTRA publications related to grazing and pasture management

[Sustainable Pasture Management](#)
[Nutrient Cycling in Pastures](#)
[Assessing the Pasture Soil Resource](#)
[Rotational Grazing](#)
[Matching Livestock & Forage in Rotational Grazing](#)
[Multispecies Grazing](#)
[Sustainable Soil Management](#)

References

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- 2) Barrett, Kathy, with D. Merrill Ewert, Ph.D. 1998. Farmer to Farmer Learning Groups. Cornell Cooperative Extension, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. 20 p.
- 3) Baker, Juli. 1997. A grazing network: In the beginning.... Pasture Talk. March. p. 11.
- 4) Anon. 1996. New farmer network groups and the university: Case study of Missouri's Green Hills Farm Project. Section II: Central processes and dynamics of the GHFP. University of Missouri. Downloaded 11 January 1998. <<http://www.ssu.missouri.edu/Publications/greenhills/s1.htm>>.
- 5) Rankin, Jason. E-mail posting on graze-l website. Downloaded 3 January 1998. <<http://www.louggheries.demon.co.uk>>.
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- 7) Burleson, Wayne. 2001. Clubs are a new neighborhood glue. Holistic Management IN PRACTICE. November/December. p. 7.
- 8) Grassroots Grazing Group. 1999. Handout to members.
- 9) Baker, Juli. 1997. The grazing network: As it works... How networks grow. Pasture Talk. April. p. 4.
- 10) Paine, Laura. 1999. A final look back at grazing network survey. Agri-View. August 5. p. 1.
- 11) Paine, Laura. 1999. Grazing networks face challenges as they mature. Agri-View. July 8. p. 1.
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- 13) Evans, Phil. E-mail posting on graze-l website. Downloaded 3 January 1998. <pevans@b150.aone.net.ay>.
- 14) Lane, Woody. E-mail posting on graze-l website. Downloaded 14 July 1998. <wlane@rosenet.net>.
- 15) Wrchota, Tom. E-mail posting on graze-l website. Downloaded 13 July 1998. <wrchota@athernet.net>.
- 16) Baker, Juli. 1997. Networks one more time: Watching the grass grow. Pasture Talk. September. p. 4.

Enclosures

Baker, Juli. 1997. A grazing network: In the beginning.... Pasture Talk. March. p. 5, 11.

Baker, Juli. 1997. A grazing network: As it works...How networks grow. Pasture Talk. April. p. 4-5.

Baker, Juli. 1997. Networks one more time: Watching the grass grow. Pasture Talk. September. p. 4, 7.

Burleson, Wayne. 2001. Clubs are a new neighborhood glue. Holistic Management IN PRACTICE. November/December. p. 7.

Paine, Laura, et al. 2000. Wisconsin's grazing networks: History, structure, and function. Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education. Vol. 29. p. 60-67.

Further Resources

Publications

Anon. No date. **Building Sustainable Farms Through Peer Relationships**. 12 p. \$2.00

Available by calling:

(518) 427-6537

or by e-mailing:

farmfood@capital.net

Barrett, Kathy, with D. Merrill Ewert, Ph.D. 1998. **Farmer to Farmer Learning Groups**. Cornell Cooperative Extension, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. 20 p. No listed price.

This is a guide to setting up and running groups similar to grazing networks, with emphasis on leadership skills and governance. It is available from:

Farming Alternatives Center

Cornell University

Ithaca, NY 14853

607-255-9832

Hochheimer, Joanne Dvorak, with Debra Austin and Karen Juenger. 1993. **Farm Support Group Manual**. Cornell Cooperative Extension. NY FarmNet, Ithaca, NY. 13 p.

This manual discusses how to determine the best structure for a group and how to organize meetings. It is available for \$8.00 from:

NY FarmNet

Cornell University

Warren Hall

Ithaca, NY 14853-7801

(607) 255-1603

University of Vermont Cooperative Extension. 1999. **Farmer Discussion Groups: Getting Started**. SARE Bulletin 4. 6 p.

Includes case studies as well as tips for successful group interaction. It is available free from:

CTR/Publications
Agricultural Engineering Building
63 Carrigan Drive
University of Vermont
Burlington, VT 05405-0004

Videos

The Farmer's Relevant Voice.

A video on how farmers participate in watershed protection by developing leadership and working cooperatively. Available for \$10.00 through Cornell University.

(607) 255-0150
mb252@cornell.edu

Resources on the World-Wide Web

Graziers from all over the world exchange ideas through graze-l.
graze-l@Vulcan.taranaki.ac.nz

Cornell University's site is rich in information, some of which is included in this list.
http://www.cals.cornell.edu/agfoodcommunity/afs_temp3.cfm?topicID=239

Upper Midwest organic farmer networks.
<http://www.mosesorganic.org/UMORD/6networks.html>

Farmer research and farmer-research networking.
<http://www.csare.org/programs/farmers.htm>

Wisconsin farmer networks.
<http://www.wisc.edu/cias/links/networks.html>

Farmer-to-farmer networks: effective grassroots sharing.
<http://www.wisc.edu/cias/pubs/briefs/023.html>

Wisconsin grazing networks: a status report.
<http://www.wisc.edu/cias/pubs/briefs/049.html>

North Central SARE Farmers Networks. Examples and ideas on how to develop farmer networks.
<http://www.sare.org/ncsare/fnnp0200.htm>

Enhancing Sustainable Agriculture Through Farmer Groups. A case study of farmer cluster groups by the Kansas Rural Center.
<http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/sustainableag/publications/ksas4.htm>

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Edited by Richard Earles
Formatted by Cynthia Arnold

April 2002

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The electronic version of **Grazing Networks for Livestock Producers** is located at:

HTML

<http://www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/grazingnetworks.html>

PDF

<http://www.attra.org/attra-pub/PDF/grazingnetworks.pdf>

