GRAZING POTENTIAL OF CRP LANDS

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So you have made the decision to graze your CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) lands! You have read the previous articles and are planing to apply the appropriate rejuvenation techniques to stimulate your CRP forage grasses. What is the next step?

Maximizing the production of CRP forage grasses will depend on how you integrate the CRP forage resource into your feed balance. This means utilizing rangeland, hay and crop aftermath, and seeded pastures to extend the grazing season as long as possible. The objective is to plan as many days of grazing during the year as climate will permit. Ranchers should systematically inventory their ranch resources and then balance land use with livestock numbers to sustain the forage resources for production. The native rangeland condition can be enhanced by making good use of introduced CRP forage species.

Management techniques for proper grazing use should include a selected rotational grazing system and will probably require more than just livestock herding to be effective. Pasture improvement practices such as fencing and cross-fencing, water developments, stockwater pipelines, tanks, etc. can be used to increase productivity and facilitate proper grazing use.

Eighty seven percent of the Montana CRP acreage consists of introduced species, most of which is crested wheatgrass with some intermediate and pubescent wheatgrass. Alfalfa is present in a few of the stands. Native species make up approximately 10% of the CRP acreage.

Crested wheatgrass has a production potential of one animal unit month (AUM)/acre/year if properly managed. The 1 AUM assumes proper pasture management techniques are applied such as a good fertility program, manure is broken up each spring with a pasture harrow, the old residue is clipped for uniform grazing, weed control and of course proper grazing management. Crested can be integrated into a forage balance for early spring pasture, special use breeding pasture and some fall grazing provided moisture is available for regrowth. Figure 1.

Pubescent and intermediate wheatgrasses have the potential of 1.25 AUM/acre/year provided the stands are adequate and the proper grazing management techniques mentioned for crested wheatgrass are applied. These species can be integrated into a forage balance to provide late spring and early summer forage. Stand densities should average two to five plants per square foot, depending on rainfall, to be productive. Ten year old stands may have low plant populations and require re-establishment to restore productivity.

Introduced stands with alfalfa as a component tend to be a little more productive, but depending on the percentage of alfalfa, may have to be managed to ovoid bloat. Sometimes this requires haying the first crop rather than grazing and grazing the regrowth later in the season when the incidence of bloat is less of a risk. Another option is grazing with the use of bloat preventative measures, i.e. management, supplements, etc.

Native pastures may be integrated into existing rangeland and managed as separate pastures or as part of larger pastures. Native range can provide forage at any time of the year if properly managed. Species composition of native species plantings can be changed to favor the more desirable species through grazing management. Many of the native species used on CRP were rhizomatous, because of the highly erodible soils, and can be enhanced through chiseling to thicken the stand, out-compete less desirable species and stimulate higher production.

Many of the CRP stands may have become decadent and allowed weed invasion. Although the CRP contract required noxious weed control, growers need to inspect their stands and implement the appropriate weed control measures for proper resource management.

Wildlife use should be included in the usable forage resource also. This is necessary to protect both wildlife and forage resources. Allocating 10 percent of the usable forage for wildlife use may be a conservative estimate according to some wildlife specialists.

Forage planning can integrate the CRP forage resources into a livestock operation and can complement existing forage resources. Careful planning will allow the development of the most profitable combination of forage resources.

On-site assistance for assessing the condition of the stand, setting up grazing management systems and recommendations on pasture improvement practices is available from your local Cooperative Extension Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service offices.

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