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 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
 David Dugan
 Extension Educator, Agriculture and Natural Resources
 Ohio Valley Extension Education Research Area

Rotational Grazing, Is It Worth The Trouble?

As we move into the middle of May, this being the 15th, grass is coming on finally. This spring has been somewhat of a carbon copy of the spring of 2011, which I was told by the National Weather Service the time period of Feb. through April is the wettest since the mid 1800's breaking the previous record set in 1964. That same time period this year is very comparable. The need to manage pastures is very important this time of the year. Grass is going to seed quickly. For the best pasture quality and quantity for the entire summer or grazing season, it is best to not allow the plants to mature. Keeping them grazed and vegetative will keep them producing longer.

With all of the wet weather we have had, everyone is behind in getting things done. Crops to be planted and forages that need to be harvested, and pastures are not great due to lack of sunshine for one, and foot traffic from livestock is also doing more than normal damage.

The ability of pastures to perform is always a topic for some good discussion. Of course, the number of head and the number of acres always plays a part in the availability of forage available to livestock, especially when we have extreme heat, lack of rain, or the combination of both.

I have done some rotational grazing in the past few years, using electric fence to split off some of the pastures into smaller acres. This has been something that I have been able to do without a huge expense. With the SOACDF fence programs over the past few years, most everyone has some old (used) steel fence post and some used barbed wire that has been replaced by the new fence. Some of the wire is most likely in good enough condition that it can be used, as well as, some of the steel post. This is what I have been using to split off some of the pastures.

A good electric fence charger will probably provide more than adequate ability to turn cows for the entire farm. One wire, high enough for the calves to get under, works well. If the calves can get under the fence easily, they will not likely tear the fence down. In addition to having less repair hours to worry about, the calves benefit from "creeping" the young tender grass that their mothers can't get to.

The fields that I had split off into smaller paddocks performed much better last year than more acres that were not split into areas that could be rotated. I am in the process of splitting fields on another farm, with plans for more. Yes, I am sold on it.

Here is some information from The University of Minnesota's study in 2005. Make note, that the areas that were rotated did have fertilizer, and the cost of the fertilizer is not mentioned. The pastures that I have been working with were basically treated the same when it comes to fertilizer, though some of the land does differ when it comes to slope.

To respond to this educational challenge, a demonstration project was conducted in 2005 to compare animal performance in a continuous grazing system, using no inputs, to animal performance on a



pasture that was fertilized and rotationally grazed.

One pasture was divided into four fenced paddocks that were fertilized according to University of Minnesota guidelines. Electric fence and a watering system were installed so that rotational grazing could be used. This pasture consisted of 41.5 acres. For comparison, a non-fertilized continuous 400-acre pasture without fertilization was used.

When results from the two grazing systems were prepared, there were several obvious differences in pasture carrying capacity and animal performance. The rotationally grazed paddocks were able to support one cow/calf pair on 2.1 acres of land for 143 days. The pasture that was continuously grazed provided support for one cow/calf pair on 5 acres for 87 days before these cattle had to be moved because of lack of available forage.

The measure of animal performance was important. During the same 87-day grazing period, cows on the rotationally grazed paddocks gained 0.38 pounds per head per day more than cows on the continuously grazed pasture. It is estimated that suckling calves gained approximately 60 pounds per head more on the rotationally grazed paddocks.

The additional weight of the cows and calves was not the only advantage. Cows on the rotationally grazed paddocks had a greater body condition score after 87 days. This increase in body condition helps to stimulate efficiency of forage utilization and allows cows to breed earlier in the breeding season. This translates to older and heavier calves at weaning.

The results of this demonstration from the summer of 2005 show the positive value of combining fertilization with rotational grazing. There are many pastures where the use of these management practices could improve forage production, reduce feed cost and increase profits.