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Greenhorn Grazing: A modular pasture and animal management curriculum for beginning and transitioning graziers

Abstract

Grazing livestock historically has been an important part of Iowa agriculture. With land and crop prices at all-time highs, grass-based enterprises are challenged to compete financially. This educational program was designed to help beginning and transitioning producers who want to establish economically and environmentally successful grazing operations.

Keywords

Animal management and forage, Human systems demographics and beginning farmer programs

Disciplines

Human Geography | Meat Science



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Abstract: Grazing livestock historically has been an important part of Iowa agriculture. With land and crop prices at all-time highs, grass-based enterprises are challenged to compete financially. This educational program was designed to help beginning and transitioning producers who want to establish economically and environmentally successful grazing operations.

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Budget:

\$23,674 for year one
\$15,467 for year two
\$12,228 for year three

Q Is there a usable grazing system that can improve pasture and hay productivity in order to control input costs and improve their bottom line?

A To address this challenge, the Greenhorn Grazing team included presentation topics that discussed alternatives focused on improving forage productivity—with the intent of lowering feed and input costs, improving unit production, and therefore improving cost competitiveness.



ECOLOGY

Background

The Greenhorn Grazing Program was developed to encourage and support grass-based livestock producers by providing current information as well as potential one-on-one assistance as they address the production and financial challenges in today's volatile livestock industry. Many of these livestock producers are searching for alternatives to control input costs, maintain acceptable production and performance levels in their livestock operation, and potentially add value and profit potential to their bottom line. To accomplish this, producers were challenged to improve pasture and forage management levels through the development and adoption of management strategies that will improve the competitiveness of the operation.

An area of significant concern in the livestock industry is that aspiring graziers are intimidated by the perceived complexity and uncertain returns of more management-intensive and/or rotational grazing ventures (i.e. controlled grazing) in a volatile market climate. The Curriculum Committee of the Greenhorn Grazing Program felt strongly that producers would benefit from programs about planning and management in grazing systems. The development group identified the need for an educational effort that was straightforward and would allow participants an opportunity to access as much or as little assistance as needed. These types of programs also would help create support networks for graziers.

The original objectives for the Greenhorn Grazing Program were to:

- Lower the perceived barriers to entry into the grass-based livestock industry in order to attract new and transitioning producers;
- Improve the productivity and/or utilization of participants' pasture and forage lands;
- Facilitate entrance of program participants into Iowa's grass-based livestock industry;
- Help maintain or increase the amount of perennial grassland agriculture in Iowa and its associated environmental benefits; and
- Instill in graziers a desire for life-long learning and professional development.



Approach and methods

Greenhorn Grazing developed an educational curriculum for beginning and transitioning producers looking for ways to expand their grazing management skill set and optimize both productivity and conservation benefits on their working lands. Organized as a modular, five-part workshop series held over the course of one growing season, each workshop was designed to be a stand-alone program with a specific agenda, with each consecutive workshop building upon previous lessons. Each session involved classroom discussions and presentations by ISU Extension and Outreach and Natural Resource Conservation Services personnel, producers, and invited presenters. The sessions included a field ‘pasture walk’ that gave participants the opportunity to observe actual pasture management schemes. The program addressed topics that can be adopted by livestock producers to influence the production, quality, utilization, economics, and marketing of their grass-based livestock operations, in addition to identifying ecological benefits.

Results and discussion

From 2009 through 2012, the Greenhorn Grazing program conducted six events. Each consisted of five pasture, forage and grazing educational workshops, typically during the growing season. Each session featured classroom presentations and discussion as well as a field event at the host site. Each session addressed five to seven discussion topics and management schemes. Greenhorn Grazing events were conducted in southeast Iowa (Jefferson County, 2009), south central Iowa (Lucas County, 2010), northeast Iowa (Jackson County, 2011), southwest Iowa (2011), and south central (Greenfield, 2012) and southeast Iowa (Washington County, 2012). More than 755 producers and interested participants were involved in the six Greenhorn Grazing sessions.

Conclusions

Participants in the Greenhorn Grazing Program were included in a statewide survey on forage and grazing management in 2012. The survey evaluated the impact of grazing and forage management educational programs such as Greenhorn Grazing, the Certified Grazier Program, and traditional ‘pasture walk’ events. Responses from Greenhorn Grazing participants were earmarked so comparisons could be made.

A total of 156 producers responded to the survey and 11 were Greenhorn Grazing (GG) participants. Among the findings from the GG responses:

- GG attended more grazing meetings (5.8 vs 3.25) than the average responder
- 91 percent of GG rotate pastures, involving 163 acres
- GG rotate on a weekly basis
- GG reported lower improvement estimates compared to the average of all responders in the area of “Increase the number of paddocks” (78 percent). *Note: An assumption could be made that the GG group had divided their pastures before their involvement with GG.*
- GG were similar in the grazing improvement reported by the average of all responders in the areas of:
- Frost seeding (38 percent)



- Number of subdivisions (55 percent)
- Grazing hay fields (0 percent)
GG indicated a higher level of grazing improvement when compared to the average of all responders in the areas of:
- Pasture fertility (33 percent)
- Inter-seeding (50 percent)
- Reestablishment of pasture stands (70 percent)
- Using annuals (83 percent)
- Weed control (66 percent)
- Water system modification (66 percent)
- Stockpiling (71 percent)
- Harvest early pasture growth as hay (29 percent)
- Body Condition Scoring (63 percent)

As the data show, GG responders indicated that the extent of their improvement due to attending GG programs was higher than the average in nine of the 13 reported categories. The improvement was similar in three of the 13 responses and lower in only one. In comparison to the average of all the responders, the GG group initiated and completed extensive changes as a direct result of the information presented at the GG program. The numbers in parentheses reflect the percentage of responders who have implemented the selected management change or plan to implement in the future due to the GG programs.

Impact of results

The Greenhorn Grazing Program has provided user-friendly information, ‘hands-on’ delivery of the material, a long-term reference source, and contacts from the university, agency, and production levels that can be useful in future decision-making. The survey showed that participants are making positive changes to improve resource productivity and conservation. The program has provided an opportunity for networking and mentoring among GG participants. These attendees clearly want to maintain or expand their forage and pasture bases. Hopefully, the economic projections will remain cost-competitive for future sustainability.

What about the future? More educational programming is needed to continue informing grass-based producers about improving their productivity in a cost-effective manner. These folks are hungry for production information, methods to improve the quality and utilization of forages, as well as projected economics and marketing opportunities. If these goals are achieved, it will have a positive economic impact on Iowa and also will support and expand future conservation benefits.

Leveraged funds

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