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Implementing an ISU Extension Master Grazer Certification Course

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Implementing an ISU Extension Master Grazer Certification Course

Abstract

Producers interested in honing their skills as graziers and pasture management specialists were able to attend classes in five Iowa locations over a three-year period. The courses were taught by ISU Extension specialists, Natural Resources Conservation Service staff, producers with experience in grazing management, and other experts.

Keywords

cattle, grazing, animal management, forage

Disciplines

Dairy Science | Meat Science



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Principal Investigator:

H. Joseph Sellers
ISU Extension and Outreach
Chariton

Budget:

\$22,500 for year one
\$22,500 for year two
\$17,952 for year three

QHow can experienced graziers upgrade their skills and help younger producers learn about grazing?

AThanks to the course, graduates of the program are engaged in ongoing grazing education and advocating the importance of grasslands in Iowa.

Background

During 2012-2013, an educational program entitled the “Certified Grazer Program” was developed and conducted to help increase the competitiveness of grazing livestock systems in Iowa. Financial support was obtained from the Leopold Center to cover a three-year program (2012-2015), with a number of volunteers, agencies, organizations and related industry representatives also providing input and support.

The Certified Grazer Program was designed to build on the knowledge gained from earlier Greenhorn Grazing sessions, pasture walks, and other introductory grazing events, leading to adoption of management schemes that can have a positive long-term impact on grazing operations. These experienced grazing participants will assist ISU Extension, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and other grazing-related personnel in program delivery—serving as mentors, potential pasture walk hosts, and/or presenters for future Certified Grazer Programs.

Objectives of the program were to:

- Provide interested graziers the necessary knowledge and tools to observe and monitor the situation on their own farms and make informed decisions.
- Facilitate change in producers’ production practices and develop their capacity to adapt current sustainable practices to their own situation.
- Facilitate mentoring of less experienced graziers by those who have completed the Certified Grazer Program.
- Provide the required training for grassland professionals to become American Forage and Grassland Council-certified, thereby completing the first steps to becoming an NRCS Technical Service provider.

Approach and methods

In 2012, the initial year of the educational program, the ISU McNay Research Farm was the only location for participants to gather. Twelve people participated in the Certified Grazer Program. The program was quite successful and the participants gave valuable advice on how to make the program more attractive to other producers. This group expressed the need for expanded opportunities for people to participate.



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Pasture walk at Certified Grazier John Schulte's farm. (Photo courtesy Joe Sellers.)

In 2013, the program was presented in two locations, Fairfield and Creston, with 15 total attendees. The 2014 programs were held in two locations, Winterset and Monticello, with 27 people participating.

Conclusions

Participants in the Certified Grazier Program wanted to improve their management skill sets, and were eager to learn how to improve their grazing systems. All members of the group had made tough decisions during the challenging 2012 grazing season—reflecting their ability to react to seasonal changes by adapting and incorporating different management practices to best fit the situation. The participants were interested in modifying their operations by using available information to maximize their resources.

The participants who received certificates indicated that they would provide mentoring support for future programs. This support includes:

- Serving as a host or presenter for the Certified Grazier and/or Greenhorn Grazing program
- Hosting and mentoring a grazing cluster
- Acting as an advisor for beginning farmers
- Hosting field days for ISU Extension, Practical Farmers of Iowa, Grazinglands Conservation Initiative, or NRCS
- Participating on advisory panels for conferences
- Serving as a guest speaker for FFA chapters or community colleges
- Collaborating on research
- Utilizing continuing education to further develop mentoring skills

In addition, the Certified Grazier Program strongly encouraged participants to implement and evaluate at least one conservation practice that contributed to the stewardship outcomes of their grazing systems. This approach reflects the commitment of the program to encourage conservation efforts. Over the three-year period of the Certified Grazier Program weather conditions presented challenges to the producers, and many adjusted their management tactics due to these conditions. Their management changes gave them the opportunity to better utilize the forages and not depend solely on harvested forages. Many of the producers took the opportunity to improve their pastures by interseeding legumes to improve the diversity, yield and quality of their pastures.

Key to going in depth and meeting the needs of the participants was developing opportunities for interaction among participants and the presenters and among the participants themselves. Being able to share what they have learned through grazing management as well as sharing their questions and concerns helped them dig deeper and meet the needs of the participants. In a follow-up survey, all of the participants said the sessions were very successful in creating an atmosphere that encouraged plenty of interaction among everyone involved.



Glenn Rowe. (Photo courtesy Iowa Cattlemen's Association.)

Impact of results

Information developed and materials packaged for the Certified Grazer Program will be used to educate partners on grazing management. Certified Graziers will participate in many of these programs to share “real life” experiences along with their management methods and strategies. NRCS staff is being trained so they are more prepared to work productively with their clients on grazing issues. The project is continuing with additional investigations of energy use, soil quality and weed population dynamics. Further economic analyses will be conducted to determine the impacts of rapidly changing crop prices and input costs, and more fully integrating crop and livestock enterprises.

Education and outreach

Sixteen publications were provided to participants from a variety of sources: NRCS, ISU Extension, ISU Veterinary Diagnostic Services, Dow AgroSciences, Midwest Perennial Forage working group, and University of Missouri. Presentations on forage use were given by four ISU Extension specialists.

The Certified Graziers Program hosted Jim Gerrish to conduct a series of pasture walks and “classroom” presentations. The series attracted many producers who also had attended previous grazing sessions or workshops such as Greenhorn Grazing. Six workshops were held in five different locations. The workshops helped producers improve their pasture management as well as their mentoring skills.

Grazing management training will continue even though the project has concluded. Some training will target beginning graziers and a series of programs called Grassroots of Grazing has been implemented. Other programs targeting Certified Graziers will be developed. These programs will vary in focus, but will include 1) grazing management strategies, 2) improving mentoring skills, and 3) livestock management to meet the demands of the consumer. There will be continued ongoing support for Certified Grazer graduates such as the Serious Grazer Workshop held in September 2015 and the Iowa Forage and Grassland Conference in January 2016.

Leveraged funds

The project used participant fees and local sponsors to add depth to the programming funded by the Leopold Center. This included \$4,800 in producer registration fees and \$3,500 in sponsor support. Producer and industry speakers volunteered 90 hours of time to support the program.

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