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.

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.

What was done and why?

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. 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.

What did we learn?

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.

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.