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Iowa Lakes Controlled Grazing, Inc. (ILCG) project

Abstract
Through the efforts of the Iowa Lakes Controlled Grazing, Inc. (ILCG) project, producers in four northwest Iowa counties learned more about how management intensive grazing and other alternative practices could be used to increase their profits and preserve environmental quality.

Keywords
Animal management and forage, Economic and environmental impacts, Farmer profitability, enterprise budgets

Disciplines
Agriculture | Animal Sciences
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Background

Good pasture management requires knowledge of the interrelationships among plants, animals, and the soil. These relationships are continually changing and are strongly influenced by the management practices producers use. The question is what tactics are best for producers to use to impact their pastureland.

Iowa Lakes Controlled Grazing, Inc. (ILCG) was organized in Clay, Dickinson, Emmet, and Palo Alto counties. A group of concerned cattle and sheep producers joined forces with local service agencies, such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the four county soil and water conservation districts, ISU Extension, Iowa Cattlemen's Association, Iowa Sheep Producers Association, the local chapter of Pheasants Forever, and Iowa Lakes RC&D. The group's goal was to determine the economic and production potential for alternative management systems in the area (which includes 33,500 acres of pastureland and 76,000 acres of Conservation Reserve Program land).

Alternatives addressed by the ILCG group included initiating a management intensive grazing (MIG) program, improving fertilization, interseeding legumes in grass pastures, planting warm season grasses, increasing the number of paddocks in a grazing system, increasing rest periods, adding a variety of watering systems, and expanding plant diversity. The ILCG group recognized that pasture management changes could range from very simple one-time alterations with only modest improvements in pasture and livestock productivity to highly integrated renovation efforts.

The goal of this project spearheaded by ILCG was to educate and demonstrate to area cattle and sheep producers, sports enthusiasts, and community, state, and federal officials some alternative grazing methods that are conducive to optimizing economic profit and protecting natural resources.

Four objectives were set for the project:
1. Train one controlled grazing demonstration cooperator in each county for each year of the project,
2. Demonstrate the significance of controlled
grazing to beef and sheep producers as well as non-producers,

3. Educate the general public on how vital the beef and sheep industries are to the economic stability of the rural communities, and

4. Facilitate the long-term leadership needed to continue these efforts beyond the duration of the project.

**Approach and methods**

ILGC, Inc. organized MIG demonstration cooperators to collect a snapshot of production and economic information for their individual beef operations. Using this information, management decisions were made for the following years (1994 to 1997). The producers willingly shared their data and experiences at field days and meetings, and through individual discussions and interactions with the media.

The four-county Iowa Cattlemen’s Association nominated and selected the cooperating livestock producers. Producers whose teamwork helped make this project succeed included:

Dennis and Dale Larson, Laurens (Palo Alto County)

Jack Johnson, Milford (Dickinson County)

Gerald (Ike) Petersen, Graettinger (Emmet County)

Allen McGranahan, Terril (Clay County)

Jim Larson, Sioux Rapids (Clay County)

Iowa Lakes Community College, Emmetsburg (Palo Alto County)

Craig White, Estherville (Emmet County)

Randy Kenobbie, Laurens (Palo Alto County)

and

Steve Swan, Dickens (Clay County)

**Results and discussion**

*Producer surveys* Surveys were conducted in 1993, 1995, 1997, and 1999. In 1993, only 16 percent of the producers surveyed were utilizing a management intensive grazing system. By 1999, the participation rate had risen to 73 percent (32 of 44 producers). Five percent of those surveyed attended a pasture walk in 1993, while 55 percent took time for a pasture walk in 1999. More than 70 percent attended at least one pasture walk each summer. Nearly two-thirds of those who responded indicated that pasture walks have increased their problem-solving ability.

Since 1995, 38 percent of the producers in the survey have increased the number of MIG acres and 64 percent have upped the number of livestock on the same number of MIG acres. Half of those responding have adopted a new fencing strategy, 16 percent adopted a new watering strategy and reduced their use of chemicals and fuel through MIG. Another 18 percent changed their livestock breeding programs to take better advantage of existing natural resources.

In 1995, only 14 percent of the producers in the survey were rotating pastures in less than seven days. This increased to 53 percent by 1999. Sixty percent (23 of 38) were resting paddocks for more than 21 days in 1999. One-third of the producers were checking pastures every one to three days to monitor productivity levels.

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Evaluating pasture at farm of Allen McGranahan, Terril: (left to right) Mark Guge, ILCG Coordinator; Paul Kassel, ISU Extension; James Russell, ISU animal scientist; Allen McGranahan, project cooperator
In 1997, about half of the producers were utilizing grass-legume pastures to increase available nitrogen supplies and allow late summer grazing. In 1999, grass-legume pastures were being used by nearly 60 percent of the farmers. Ninety percent of the producers said they now realized that overgrazing in the summer significantly reduces fall forage production. In 1997, only 10 percent of the producers employed stockpiled grazing, but by 1999, 38 percent were using this practice.

One-third of the producers utilizing MIG reported an increase in their farm income! Seven beef cow-calf enterprises demonstrated a range of 142 to 375 pounds of beef gain per acre, with an average of 221 pounds. The average beef value added per acre was $166.

Impact of results

To advance the ILCG program to the next level, an integrated resource management (IRM) program for beef cow-calf producers was needed. This would allow for one-on-one problem-solving and decision-making assistance to enhance profitability. ILCG, in cooperation with CowHerd Improvement Program Services, Inc. (CHIPS), acquired additional funding for a technician who will work with individual clients on record keeping, natural resource utilization, and technology adoption.

Education and outreach

Twenty-two pasture walks (in which 1,027 people participated), 19 meetings, nine ICN programs, and seven tours were held in the ILCG area during the project duration. Program presentations were given at 17 statewide meetings attended by 1,489 persons in Iowa and Minnesota.

The Iowa Beef Connections tour brought 75 Iowa business and industry representatives to view the MIG operations of the project cooperators. Fifty-five leaders from the Spencer Area Association of Business and Industry toured the cooperators' farms. Iowa Lakes Clean Water Alliance brought 51 members to see how management intensive grazing improved water quality.