

Results of Grazing a Common Pasture in Southeastern Montana

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This is a brief history of the use and results of a common grazing area in southeastern Montana, over the past twenty years.

During the "long drouth" of the 1930's the U. S. Department of Agriculture began buying sub-marginal farms and farm lands in a good many areas of the United States. It started buying land in our area in 1935. In 1936 the farmers and ranchers in our county formed a Cooperative State Grazing District through which we hoped to manage as much land as the District could lease or buy.

We live in southeastern Prairie County, on Cabin Creek, in what is generally considered one of the drier areas of the State. The common grazing area, or Community Pasture No. 4, is about 26 miles mostly east, but a little south of Terry, Montana.

Early Development

Soon after the Government began buying the land they began developing it for summer grazing, which included removing unneeded farm buildings and fences; building stockwater dams; developing springs and drilling wells or equipping wells already on the land; re-seeding abandoned fields; and fencing areas to form pastures. At the same time the grazing district was busy, leasing range land and establishing the "grazing preferences" of its members.

During this time, we were no different from most other farmers or ranchers in eastern Montana—or the whole Great Plains, for that matter. Due to drouth and lack of land and feed, we had been forced to sell most of our range stock. Due to low prices and generally unfavorable conditions we and our neighbors were in no

position to buy back into the cattle business.

This time of change-over lasted about 10 years, as most people will recall, was pretty discouraging and at times seemed almost hopeless. Looking back at it, maybe it was a blessing in disguise since, being understocked, our grass also had a

John and Dave Strobel have been permittees on a community grazing project in southeastern Montana since 1948, the year the program began. In this article they tell how the community pasture has helped in their operations and how some of the problems of common grazing have been solved. The Strobel family has been farming and ranching in Prairie County since 1914.

chance to recuperate from the abuse and drouth it had been subjected to.

Little by little things improved, we had our home ranches, a grazing preference, more stock and grazing allotments.

Our range allotment was in pasture No. 4, in the same general area where we had been trying to run in the past. Nine of us ranchers were to run in this pasture of about twenty-seven sections of land. We were to run from 36 to 180 head of cattle, according to our grazing preference.

Nutritional Deficiency?

Things began looking better, but in 1949 we ran into trouble. Our stock showed lameness, poor fleshing, depraved appetites and bone chewing, and by no means least, we had poor calf crops of weak calves. The trouble was thought to be a phosphorus deficiency. This was not uncommon, since areas de-

ficient in this element had been known in Montana for 25 years or more. What to do? what to feed? how much? when, where and how?, were the questions. We asked our grazing district, The Montana Livestock Sanitary Board, The Montana Research Laboratory, The Montana Extension Service, and the Soil Conservation Service to help us.

"I, for one," said John Strobel, "was ready to do something. My 1950 calf crop was 53 percent."

Another rancher, Erling Mathiason, who also ran cattle in this pasture had a calf crop of 75 percent.

Each of the above governmental agencies did what they could. Dr. Glen Halver came from Glendive, representing the Livestock Sanitary Board. He checked our cattle for possible disease and took blood samples which the Research Laboratory in Bozeman analyzed. Phil VanCleave and Dave Rivenes, of the Soil Conservation Service, took forage and soil samples for analysis. Our County Agent, Phil Wilson, helped organize and coordinate the work.

When the results of the tests were in, it was apparent that we had a phosphorus deficiency. Dr. Halver summed it up: A known soil deficiency, limited movement of stock on the range, drouth, and changes in the type of ranching and cattle used.

Minerals Bring Benefits

We began feeding a mineral supplement the fall of 1949, but in 1950, we began feeding phosphorus-salt mixture in earnest.

Pasture No. 4 is naturally divided into three parts by high divides or ridges. We fed different mineral-salt mixtures in each area, all of which had about 10 percent phosphorus. At the end of the grazing season we had some surprising results. John Strobel said that his calf crop jumped from 53 to 90 percent. The weights of his stock jumped also. Erling Mathiason's calf crop increased from 75 to 98 percent from 1950

to 1951 and was 94 percent in 1952. His average yearling steer weight increased 96 pounds from 1950 to 1951.

We did a little experimenting after 1951 and finally settled upon a mixture of equal parts of white salt, mineral salt, monosodium phosphate and steamed bone-meal.

As our stocking rate approached the maximum, we found that we needed more water. The government had built five reservoirs and drilled seven wells. We built three additional reservoirs, attempted one well (which was a dry hole), and deepened one of the government wells so it would furnish more water.

In 1953, some of us wanted a breeding pasture, hoping to increase and get more uniform calf crops. We asked and received permission to fence off two corners of the main pasture for breeding. We use these from June 20 to July 31. We take our bulls home the middle of September.

Salting Practices

About this time, even with the additional water, it became apparent that the grass around the water was taking a beating. As one fellow said of one of the heavier stocked areas, "It looks like a corral, from the amount of manure and lack of grass."

We voted to put our mineral-salt mixture stations away from water, to encourage the cattle to graze in places they had not been using. At first we put these stations about one-quarter mile from water. We later moved them farther away. The grass around some of these

even took quite a bit of trampling—so now, we look around and put them where the grass is grazed the least. At first we had to move cattle to these stations, but now they look them up. They now move between salt stations and water, eating as they wish. The result—we get an even amount of grazing all over the pasture, and the grass around the water is improving.

Ranchers wouldn't be ranchers if they didn't figure costs. When we started using a mineral-salt mixture, it cost about 1¢ per cow, per day. We have been able to reduce this to about five sixths cent per day, or \$0.25 per month. They eat an average of four pounds of the mixture per cow, per month. Maintenance of range improvements (both the Government and those we built) costs about 50¢ per cow per year. This does not include any labor costs.

Pasture Administration

Our grazing fees are based roughly on the price of cattle, tempered by the general costs of running a grazing district. This year (1956) they are 40¢ per cow, per month.

A lot of people around the country have the idea that ranchers who have the privilege of grazing Federal land, get the grass for next to nothing. We don't agree with this. We figure we pay about \$100 or more per section for grazing in the pasture. We don't think this is getting something for nothing. Twenty-five percent of this, of course, goes to the county to take the place of taxes.

After 20 years, we feel we have

given grazing in common with neighbors, a pretty good test, and feel that this pasture is our only salvation, to use our ranches to the best advantage.

Most of the land in the pasture is Government-owned, administered by the Department of Agriculture: since 1954 by the Forest Service, which supervises its use pretty closely through our Grazing District. We don't object to this. Both they and the Grazing District insist on no overgrazing, which may be the most important part of ranching. This was particularly noticeable this year, which was awfully dry. However, even this year, wherever there was old grass, new grass grew; but wherever all of last year's grass was fed off, new grass didn't grow.

Summary of 20 Years Experience

1. Soil and consequent forage deficiencies, must be overcome. We believe feeding mineral-salt mixture worked out best for us.

2. The more intensively you use range the more water distribution you need. We are correcting this by supplementing the Government water, with dams and wells which we paid for among ourselves.

3. Grazing must be distributed if you don't want to sacrifice some areas and get no use of others. We believe we are getting this done by properly salting on the range.

4. A common grazing area, in a State Grazing District, is a way to stabilize a ranch operation. We like this system.

5. You can't overgraze a range and expect to stay in the cattle business over a very long period of years.

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