

Livestock Management

The thoughtful management of livestock goes hand in hand with land stewardship and often produces the best long-term economic return.

Domestic livestock production measured in animal growth, milk production, or reproduction all comes from what they eat. Profitability often increases and expenses often decrease when livestock can rely primarily on the native vegetation provided in Central Texas. Mining involves extracting a product over short period of time. Conservation grazing involves ensuring your land is productive from one generation to the next.

Grass Management

A critical measure of rangeland health is the amount of residual forage left after grazing. When land is overgrazed, the number of desirable plants decreases while the number of undesirable plants increases. When land is grazed properly, there is a reserve of leaf and stem left so that the plants recover. This residual forage protects the plant crown from cold, heat and insect damage. Documents found at <https://agrilifebookstore.org/> show how leaving residual increases future range productivity and cattle production. Good rules of thumb to follow include:

- Calculate Stocking Rate. Publications are available online or contact your local Agrilife or NRCS office.
- Grow healthy grasses in the good years for the bad years.
- Graze ½ of plant height and leave ½.
- Use 25% harvest efficiency when calculating Stocking Rate.
- Only consider acres that are actively being grazed by livestock when calculating Stocking Rate. Do not include riparian, hilly, rocky, or brushy land not being grazed.
- Allow 90 days of rest every 4 years minimum.
- Fence off riparian areas (see Soil and Water Considerations).

Specific Tips for Cattle

- Watch for Lazy Cows. Cows resting in the afternoon chewing their cud are probably getting enough to eat; a good indicator of proper stocking rate.
- Body condition is an excellent indicator of nutritional status. It is normal for cows to gain weight during pregnancy and lose weight while nursing a calf. A cow in “good” shape will be smooth and flat backed and her ribs will not be visible.

- Beware the Large Cow. Stocking rate calculations are based on an animal unit, which is the amount of forage required to sustain a 1000 lb cow and her calf for one year. Many cows today weigh over 1200 lb, and thus have greater forage requirements.

Specific Tips for Sheep

- Sheep prefer grasses and forbs (weeds). Continuous grazing activity, especially during the heat of the day, is an indicator of insufficient forage availability. Monitor grazing behavior and body condition to determine nutritional status.

Specific Tips for Goats

- Goats have a strong preference for browse, the leaves produced by trees, bushes and vines. Watch for the establishment of browse lines on the more preferred browse species. A well established browse line on less preferred species (ex. Juniper or 'cedar') is an indicator of excessive grazing pressure.