

Twelve Step Plan to Amazing Grazing for Beef Cattle

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One day last winter as we drove to Roanoke for the American Forage and Grasslands Council Annual Conference we talked at length about why more people don't adopt better grazing management techniques. We realized it might be because we have been practicing Adaptive Grazing Management for so long we forget how we got started. Advanced graziers sometimes turn off novices because what seems obvious to the experienced is a brand new concept to folks just getting started. It is clear, however, that more and more farmers are interested in starting the pursuit of "Amazing Grazing". We get a lot of questions about how to get from a traditionally managed farm to a place where you can see "Amazing Grazing" in action. It doesn't happen quickly, but changing your management approach can turn a system around and begin the soil health building process. Here is a twelve step plan that can help you along the journey.

Step 1. Decide you are ready to become a critical thinker and to manage your farm using ecological principles. Most of us have grown up with a production system that uses a lot of hay and other purchased feeds, is based on continuous or very lax rotational grazing, and that has a focus on a single part of the system, the animal. We have been taught a lot about nutrition, reproduction and genetics, as well as showing animals, but relatively little about managing the complex and dynamic pasture ecosystem. When we get in a drought we hold onto the animals, buy more hay, and allow the pastures to get overgrazed.

The truth is that if you spend a lot of time feeding hay in winter, making hay in summer, and worrying about running out of grass during droughts, there is a better way. Your farm is an ecosystem that includes you, the animals, the forages, the soil, and the water cycle and a million other connections. Once you see it as one system, you have a chance to observe and then guide the system in a direction that benefits your production and personal goals.

Do you want to shorten the hay feeding season, grow more forage with less inputs, and improve your lifestyle? All that is possible, but Adaptive Grazing Management can only work if you admit you don't understand your system but are willing to spend the time and energy

trying to figure it out. The truth is no one really understands these systems, but there are many of us that have decided to devote a lifetime to observing all parts of the system, making management decisions, critically evaluating results, and adapting our management to improve those outcomes.

One key thing to be aware of is that Adaptive Grazing Management means you will spend more time on your feet and less time on equipment. While new remote sensing technologies are being developed, there is no substitute for walking pasture, feeling it under your feet, and spending time putting up polywire and closely observing your cows. The exercise you get from this activity is well balanced and low impact, and can really improve your health and well-being.

Step 2. Surround yourself with like-minded graziers. After you decide to embark on this endless journey to Amazing Grazing, you need to have a support network. We need to keep our current friends, but understand there will be peer pressure to go back to the old ways of doing things. Obviously it is mentally easier to turn on a tractor, spear a bale of hay and deliver it to a hay ring, than to have cows strip grazing behind a single strand of polywire. You may become known among your peers as "that loco guy that spends all winter moving that silly little string".

The best way to succeed is to make a new peer group that has similar goals to your own. Finding them is easy; just attend an Amazing Grazing Workshop or other educational event and engage the more experienced participants with questions. Experienced Adaptive Graziers are very likely to attend these educational events and you will find them amazingly open with sharing their ideas and practices.

Another issue with the way many of us were raised is that we were always in a competitive environment. Competition can be a good thing as long as we have the correct target in mind. Learning from each other about practices that improve our land and profit margins should be our focus instead of bragging about weaning weights at the coffee shop.

Adaptive graziers tend to be open and sharing, and approach life more as a collaborative journey than as a competitive one. As you develop and grow your skills you will see opportunities to host educational demonstrations and workshops, so take advantage of those opportunities to lead and expand your network.

Step 3. Do a preliminary analysis of your system resources. Start with aerial maps that you can obtain off the web or from your FSA office. Evaluate the acreage in each pasture and evaluate pasture condition. The best way to evaluate your forage stand and pasture condition is to do a "point step" analysis which involves randomly walking the pasture, periodically writing down the species of plant you are stepping on (or bare ground), and writing down a preliminary condition score from 1 to 5 (1 = bare with almost no productive forage 5 = as good

as it gets with a diversity of strong and desirable forages and no bare ground). Do this on at least 100 points and get the average for the pasture.

Were you able to identify all the major desirable and undesirable species? If not then reviewing the common weeds and pasture plants would be advised. Was it easy for you to call out a condition score? If not then take time to learn more about this topic. Condition scoring can be a complex subject, but also it is a simple concept you can learn to monitor continuously once you really know your pastures.

Take soil samples from each pasture to determine the pH and soil nutrient levels. Once you are practicing more intensive forms of Adaptive Grazing Management many of the manure and urine nutrients will cycle and reduce your need for fertilizer, but, if you start with low pH or low nutrient levels, you will need to correct them to get the system working. From this systematic approach you can start to better understand your pastures, what the balance of desirable and undesirable species is, identify weak and strong spots, and which pastures will give a bigger response to improved management or complete renovation.

Step 4. Upgrade your electric fences and electric fencing skills. This is a critical step because Adaptive Grazing Management requires animals that are well trained to temporary fencing. You will need high power levels and good fence trouble shooting skills to make that happen. With traditional management and multi-wire perimeter fences, having some power on the fence some of the time may have worked, but it will not work with Adaptive Grazing Management. You need to understand the theory of how electric fence works, and how to use a fault finder to find shorts and keep power on the fence high. Bluntly, if you don't maintain power on electric fence, animals will not respect temporary fence and you will likely abandon the journey to Amazing Grazing.

Step 5. Train your animals to respect a single strand of wire. It is critical that your animals have a high level of respect for temporary electric fence. Electric fence is only a mental barrier, and that is played out to the extreme with a single strand of polywire. However, once animals are well trained to it, it opens up a whole new world based on "The Power of One Wire". Those benefits include improved forage management, easier movement and gathering of animals, ability to flexibly exclude sensitive areas within pasture, and to respond to perimeter fence damage resulting from natural disasters.

To train the animals, set up a single strand of polywire on tread in posts about 18 inches inside of a pen or a small pasture. It is probably better to use a small pasture because it is more the setting where the animals will first encounter polywire cross fences. The key to the training period is that there is plenty of power on the wire and we would recommend a minimum of 5 kilovolts. You might do some feeding under the wire so animals are close to it, and you also

might use the trick of attaching a strip of aluminum foil with peanut butter on it to the wire to attract deer and teach them what polywire is too. It will take a few weeks for this preliminary training period, and then the training goes to the next level with a single strand cross fence.

Step 6. Start cutting individual pastures in half with polywire. The place to start with Adaptive Grazing Management is to divide each permanent pasture in half, with cattle entering the half with the water source whenever you rotate pastures. This change alone will double your stocking density and will start leading to improvements in your system. We recommend using some rigid fiberglass or plastic posts on the ends (and potentially within the line) in these initial temporary divisions because animals, especially wildlife, will still be in the training process. Setting it up so it will not be easily torn down is good to start with, and as you repeat the process again and again you will learn how to make it stronger and more resilient to tear down using only tread in posts. Now you will also start to develop your skills at looking at a grazed sward and determining when to take down the division fence. An average stop grazing height of 2-4 inches in all systems is not a bad rule of thumb, a little on the shorter side for bermudagrass-based systems (2-3 inches) than for fescue-based systems (3-4 inches).

Step 7. Stockpile forage in autumn and strip-graze during the winter followed by dispersed hay feeding. In early summer determine one or more pastures to stockpile for late fall or winter grazing. This might be a mostly fescue field in many areas but could also be a bermudagrass field. Either way, manage the pastures so that the stand is in good shape (either grazed or clipped), and then add about 50 lbs of nitrogen on about September 1, and allow it to grow undisturbed until November 1 for bermudagrass or January 1 for tall fescue. When you start grazing, set up an initial grazing strip that includes the water source and an expected 2 to 3 days of grass. Once the forage has been consumed you will need to move the fence to allocate enough grass to feed your cattle for the next 1 to 3 day grazing period. Moving cattle daily has many advantages but cannot be achieved in all situations. However, moving fence every three days is attainable and still gives great forage utilization. This is a great learning opportunity for you and your animals, and it seems doing some daily moves really helps you develop the skills of forage allocation. Try moving your cattle daily when you can (i.e. weekends) and resume the every third day move during the week.

Calculate the forage needs of your cows and determine an estimate of how much forage is available to target the length of your moves. Of course you need to adapt the size of the offering as you go, but having an idea how many acres should be needed each day will give you a good starting point and a way to calculate a feed budget. Learning how to step off the length and width of your paddock will help you calculate the land area and forage allocation. After you finish grazing all the stockpiled pastures start unrolling hay or rotating hay rings in areas that can benefit from animal impact and increased nutrients.

Step 8. Start strip grazing with all pasture movements during the growing season. Once you are into spring, continue to use the strip grazing technique, flip flopping two reels so that cows are always on a fresh strip, and keep another 1 to 3 day strip set up ahead of them. Having the next strip set up will help you save time and offer added security in case your polywire is torn down by wildlife or your cattle. As long as you are not in an individual pasture more than 10-14 days there is no need to set up a back fence to keep animals off the grazed areas.. If you see animals grazing in the area they already grazed (back-grazing) then you need to make your strips wider as they will always prefer to graze in the fresh strip if there is adequate forage there. This practice that we call modified strip grazing will become your key grazing tool and you will use it as long as you are a grazer. The flexibility in the size of strip you offer allows you to flex with your schedule, and you can also set up multiple strips ahead of time if you have to depend on a helper to periodically move your animals. It also allows you to impact animal performance by varying the stop grazing height. In general the higher the stop grazing height the higher animal performance but the lower grazing utilization efficiency. The reverse is true....at lower stop grazing height performance will be lower but utilization efficiency can be high. On general terms use a higher stop grazing height with growing cattle or thin cows and a shorter stop grazing height with brood cows in good body condition.

Step 9. Develop a comprehensive grazing plan acceptable to NRCS and other governmental agencies. As you start to optimize the use of your current infrastructure you will see opportunities to improve by adding additional perimeter fencing, watering points, and permanent cross fencing. To guide these efforts you need a comprehensive forage and grazing plan that includes existing and needed infrastructure, that determines an animal/forage balance, and that will project infrastructure development to guide your financial planning and application for cost-share funds. There are many opportunities for both infrastructure development contracts, and also management-based contracts for practices such as Prescribed Grazing. This comprehensive plan will need to be facilitated by a trained planner that can help make sure the plan is acceptable to all agencies involved, and also will be a key for you to keep on a long-term plan for your system.

Step 10. Implement additional upgrades to infrastructure. As highlighted in your comprehensive plan, start to improve your watering system, upgrade perimeter fencing and add cross-fencing. This infrastructure improvement usually needs to be prioritized and done in stages so that you make major improvements in system function with each project, and so you have time to continue your good management while completing the projects in a timely manner. Full implementation of the comprehensive plan will take many years or even decades, and the plan must be revisited and updated as you go through time.

Step 11. Continue to refine your skills, be persistent and tenacious. It takes 5 to 10 years to really see the benefits of Adaptive Grazing Management. The road to "Amazing Grazing" is challenging because you are dealing with a very dynamic system that is upset by many environmental factors. With time your system will become more resilient to drought and flood, as a result of improved soil health, but that happens gradually and you have to be patient. When the first drought hits, realize that the most critical principle in Adaptive Grazing Management is to avoid overgrazing at all costs. When pastures are all down to the stop grazing height, pull cattle into a sacrifice area and feed hay. Don't get discouraged and abandon what you have started! As soon as the rain comes you will be amazed at what you see compared to your neighbors that continued to graze all pastures through the drought.

Also, understand that it is not uncommon for temporary fence to be torn down when you are early in the game. Don't get frustrated and quit....observe, learn and adapt. Was it low power, lack of training, or a physical failure (corner failed?) that led to the malfunction? As your skills develop your system failures in the temporary fence will become rare events, but they can still happen even in the best of systems.

Step 12. Observe your system and continually improve your management skills. One thing we love about Adaptive Grazing Management is that we continue to be challenged to learn at a more rapid pace even after all these years. We realize that there is knowledge in every mistake and from every curve ball that nature throws our way. But, no problem or failure is without opportunity. The road to Amazing Grazing is a journey without an end. Once you have been practicing Adaptive Grazing Management for several years you will realize that you really don't get to Amazing Grazing, but you can get close to it if you are tenacious.

Continue to attend educational events and as you mature in your understanding of your management, and share that with other producers. Adaptive graziers with a positive collaborative attitude are a very positive role model in our industry. Share your grazing excitement with young people, either your immediate family, or through other youth programs. Teach Adaptive Grazing Management skills to the next generation when they are young so that it is not a new concept to them when they start making the management decisions.

We welcome you to join the journey to Amazing Grazing! There are many producers that have started using Adaptive Grazing Management and are on the journey. It works out to be an exciting and mindful life trying to figure out where we fit into this complex ecosystem. No matter where you are on the twelve step plan, review the steps and make sure you are on track. Whether you are at the steps where you are just trying to gain awareness, needing to improve your electric fence skills, learning how to take and interpret soil samples, or needing to develop a comprehensive grazing plan there will be educational opportunities coming up that will serve you well.

