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Iowa Lakes Controlled Grazing, Inc. (ILCG)

Dennis L. DeWitt
Iowa State University

Mark W. Guge
Iowa Lakes Controlled Grazing, Inc.

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Abstract
Iowa Lakes Controlled Grazing, Inc. (ILCG) was formed to educate producers and non-producers about alternative grazing methods which are conducive to optimizing economic profit and enhancing the environment. In 1994, four beef producers—one from each county agreed to cooperate with the ILCG to collect production and economic information on what they are currently doing with their beef operations. In 1995, three of the four continued to cooperate and four new cooperators were started in the ILCG program. All cooperators are willing to share this information with others.

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Dennis L. DeWitt, extension livestock field specialist,
and Mark W. Guge, ILCG project coordinator

Summary

Iowa Lakes Controlled Grazing, Inc. (ILCG) was formed to educate producers and non-producers about alternative grazing methods which are conducive to optimizing economic profit and enhancing the environment. In 1994, four beef producers--one from each county agreed to cooperate with the ILCG to collect production and economic information on what they are currently doing with their beef operations. In 1995, three of the four continued to cooperate and four new cooperators were started in the ILCG program. All cooperators are willing to share this information with others.

Introduction

Emmet, Palo Alto, Dickinson, and Clay Counties (District 2 Iowa Cattlemen's Association) are located in the glacially formed prairie pothole region of northern Iowa. Residents of this four-county region have increasing interest in the area's environmental sensitivity which is due to its unique glacial topography. The majority of the highly erodible land (HEL), the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres, and pasture lands lie in the rolling glacial moraine areas that surround many of the prairie pothole lakes and border the Des Moines and Little Sioux rivers.

The Iowa Controlled Grazing, Inc. (ILCG) counties have seen a 12 percent decline in pasture/hay acres since 1982 from 38,000 to 33,500 acres. This trend is due in part to fluctuations in the cattle and sheep markets but is largely due to the influences of government subsidy programs promoting row-crop production as essential to the economic welfare of producers and their communities. These programs, along with decreased producer efficiency and poor forage management, have led to the decline of the small cow/calf and sheep enterprises which were numerous in the past.

CRP totals 76,000 acres and became eligibile for conversion in 1995. Many producers were fearful of losing this potential wealth of grazing land to row-crop production if landowners and the general public are not educated in the importance of maintaining pasture land to retaining the family livestock farms in rural communities.

There are 82,778 HEL acres in need of conservation practices to reduce soil losses into the water sources and Iowa Great Lakes. Grazing instead of row-cropping is one proven way to improve an area's water quality.

A group of concerned cattle and sheep producers has joined together with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the four county Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Iowa State University Extension, Iowa Cattlemen's Association, Iowa Sheep Producers Association, the local chapter of Pheasants Forever, Iowa Lakes RC&D, and local agencies to initiate a program demonstrating alternative grazing techniques and profit potential for cattle and sheep producers and how that profit potential can radiate through local rural communities.

The project focus is to educate and demonstrate to area cattle and sheep producers, sports enthusiasts, and community, state, and federal leaders alternative grazing methods which are conducive to optimizing economic profit and enhancing the environments.

This is being accomplished through the following objectives:

1. Organizing four controlled grazing demonstration cooperators each year of the project.
2. Demonstrating the significance of controlled grazing to producers and non-producers.
3. Educating the general public on how vital the cattle and sheep industries are to the economic stability of rural communities.
4. Facilitating long-term leadership to continue efforts beyond the program time.

Poor resource management produces low profit margins which affect local communities: small businesses catering to producer's needs may close, and small, family-owned farms may be foreclosed. In addition to loss of profit potential, a producer faces low forage yields, decreased carrying capacity, excessive soil loss and nutrient runoff, reduced wildlife habitat, and diminished respect from the non-agriculture community.

The ILCG project coordinator surveyed 250 producers in the four counties to determine interest and need for educational assistance in improving controlled grazing practices. The survey results indicated 77% of the producers were interested in receiving assistance to improve grazing practices to improve soil and water conservation and profit potential.

Two educational sessions were held to show producers benefits of improving grazing practices. After each meeting, producers were asked what was needed for them to make the needed changes. The two main responses given were, "We need to just bite the bullet and do it," and "We need personal educational assistance and encouragement."

Thus the 13-member ILCG board of directors was organized. The three members from each county represent organizations, committees, agencies, and special interest groups who exhibit an active interest in the welfare of the local cattle and sheep producers and their communities.

Materials and Methods

The ILCG board of directors identifies the types of grazing systems to be monitored and determines the cooperators best suited to demonstrate these systems. The ILCG is now a nonprofit corporation and has filed for 501 (C) 3 status. In 1994, four beef producers, one from each participating county, agreed to cooperate with the ILCG to

collect production and economic information on what they are currently doing with their beef operations.

In 1995, three of the four continued to cooperate and four new cooperators were started in the ILCG program. All cooperators are willing to share this information with others.

Results and Discussion

1994

Palo Alto County producers Dennis and Dale Larson, Laurens, were using one 44-acre field with a corn base of 125 bushels per acre as a single pasture for grazing. In 1995, they divided the single pasture into four paddocks consisting of 10 or 12 acres each. The 39 cows and calves and 12 replacement heifers were divided into two herds by age and genetics. The four paddocks were grazed six times each for a total of 45 to 50 days during the summer. The intent was to graze 50% of the sward height; however, only about 25% of the inches were grazed during each rotation. In addition, 77 tons of forage were harvested for stored feed supply.

The 39 cows, weight gain was 2,662 pounds,;the 12 replacement heifers' gain was 1,655 pounds; and weaned calf weight was 13,230 pounds. This amounts to 17,556 total pounds or 399 pounds of beef per acre. The calf average daily gain was 1.84 pounds per day on pasture. The cows increase in weight gain also translated into a .78 increase in cow condition score.

Group One cows consisted of 27 animal units at a stocking density of 2.25 and 2.70. The acres-per-animal unit was .81 with 95 total grazing days. Group Two cows consisted of 29 animal units at a stocking density of 2.9 and 2.4 animal units per acre. The acres-per-animal unit was .76 with 93 total grazing days. Plans for next year are to increase the number of paddocks and to start grazing earlier.

Clay County producer Allen McGranahan, Dickens, farms next to Trumbull Lake in Lake Township. McGranahan's forage plans are to harvest all pastures as haylage to be fed during drought or winter feeding times. In June, 87 tons of haylage and 25 large round bales were harvested. Three pastures consists of 29, 22, and 15 acres. The 29-acre pasture was divided into four five-acre and one nine-acre paddocks. The 22-acre pasture was divided into three four-acre and two five-acre paddocks. The 15 acres were left in one paddock, as this contained a dugout pondwater supply for all paddocks. The 45 cow/calf pairs grazed 125 days and rotated through the system two to four times. This is the second year of adding more paddocks to the grazing system.

The 43 cows' weight gain was 3,543 pounds and they showed an increase of .2 condition score. The weaned calf weight was 20,680 pounds. This amounts to 24,223 total pounds or 367 pounds of beef per acre. The calf average daily gain was 2.21 pounds per day on pasture. The 54 animal units had a stocking density of 10 animal units per acre. The acre-per-animal unit was 1.2 with 103 total grazing days.

Emmet County producer Ike Petersen, Graettinger, farms all highly erodible land (HEL) and needs to conserve to avoid severe erosion. The 80 acres of pasture have cow paths developed, overgrazed areas, and some wetlands susceptibility. Petersen wanted to improve pasture productivity, increase plant diversity, and increase cow carrying capacity of the pasture. The 80 acres were divided into six paddocks and rotated three or four times during the grazing season. A solar fencer was utilized to provide energy for the fencing system. In addition, 3.5 tons of forage were taken off one of the paddocks for winter feed. The District Soil Conservationist works very closely with Peterson to cost-share many improvements.

The 41 cows lost 1,110 pounds or 27 pounds per head; however, the body scores increased from 4.66 to 5.59. The weaned calf weight was 21,200 pounds or 493 pounds per head. The calf average daily gain was 2.19 pounds per day on pasture. The 50 animal units had a stocking density of 3.75 animal units per acre. The acres-per-animal unit was 1.6 with 168 total grazing days.

Dickinson County producer William Boese, Milford, farms 90 acres next to the Little Sioux River two miles west of Lake Okoboji. This year, Boese seeded all the land to forages. The hills are very bare and the low land floods every year. This was the beginning of a forage system only for his 18 cows and 10 bred heifers.

1995

Jack Johnson, Milford, is grazing 80 Hereford cows and calves on improved grass pastures. Johnson has gone from 85-acre pastures to sub-dividing into four paddocks.

Jim Larson, Sioux Rapids, began rotationally grazing 41 Angus cows with calves and 13 replacement heifers on May 1. His 70 acres of highly erodible grass hills and creek bottom have a stand of birdsfoot trefoil growing in the bluegrass. The cows are also grazing 10 acres of orchard and brome grass with birdsfoot trefoil. Working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Clay County, five acres were seeded to warm-season Eastern gamagrass this summer for next year's grazing.

Randy Knobbie, Laurens, has been grazing stockers for several years in two bluegrass pastures of 15 and 18 acres. He knew there had to be a way to get more out of his grazing program. This was his first attempt at rotationally grazing 119 head of 667-pound heifers.

Steve Swan, has 83 head of 650-pound crossbred steers grazing 25 acres of legume-grass pasture. Swan moves the paddock fences every one or two days. He has a moveable watering and feedbunk system.

Implications

The ILCG project demonstrates that alternative controlled grazing management practices will enable producers to optimize economic profit and enhance the environments.

Acknowledgments

Much cooperation has been received from the Iowa State University Extension Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Iowa Cattlemen's Association. Dennis DeWitt, extension livestock field

specialist, gave the lead in writing the original grant proposal to the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. He has continued to work very closely with the project in program development, meetings, field days, and writing the progress report.

Emmet County District Conservationist Wayne Shafer helped write the original grant proposal. He also worked with producers to receive cost-share dollars from REAP funds. Mr. Shafer worked with producers one-on-one to get them started in rotational grazing.

Mark Guge, ILCG project coordinator, is responsible for day-to-day coordination of the grazing demonstration farms.

Bob Ness, Iowa Cattlemen's District 2 director (Emmet, Palo Alto, Dickinson, and Clay Counties), serves on the ILCG board of directors. This gives him a good opportunity to serve as a liaison between the ILCG and Iowa Cattlemen's Association office in Ames.

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