



Developing Management Strategies for Your Range

This guide is designed to cover topics that range cow-calf producers will face as they develop management strategies for their overall operations. Two underlying assumptions were made. First, that spring calving is the common practice, and second, that hay would be made and used for winter feeding. When producers do neither of these practices, the parts addressed to those topics do not affect them.

The guide is composed of a yearly calendar of management events or activities and a management planning section. The planning section is first because it sets the stage for those events in the yearly calendar.

Management Planning

Every producer makes plans, whether formalized or not. Many plan over a more or less continuous time throughout the year. This is good. Designating one central time of year for planning has some merits as well. These are addressed in this section and offered as a logical way to plan the range and hay parts of an overall production program.

Major planning can be done at any time of year but late fall to early winter is suggested, for two reasons. The experiences of the previous season are fresh and can better be brought to bear. If any "slack" time exists during the year, it should be then.

Review year just completed

Analyze your notes and records carefully. Then answer these questions:

- How well did you meet all of the objectives that you had planned?
- What kind of a range forage year was it? How was it different in terms of both weather and the effect that weather had on the amount, time, and quality of forage growth?
- How well did the forage supply and demand work out? Were you short or long on forage? If short, what could you have done differently to avoid the shortage? If long, what were the reasons? Could or should you have done anything to use more forage?
- What adjustments did you make from your plan? Were they effective in meeting your objectives?
- To what extent did weather positively or negatively affect plant and animal production as compared to your direct management? In other words, is your management having positive effects?

Review Your Long-Range Ranch Plan

- Is it still viable? Are the goals realistic as you build your record base? Discard or revise the impractical or unachievable goals.

Set objectives for the coming year

- Consider tax management and lending/borrowing policies. They can greatly affect objectives.
- Break objectives into sub-objectives and develop procedures to meet each. Be sure to consider all feasible, economical alternatives.
- Make objectives both realistic and limited. For example, the objective in pasture A may be a total of 500 animal months of grazing based on forage potential. Let's say you currently produce 300 animal months. To get to 500 animal months may take several changes, e.g., more stockwater and grazing adjustments in both time and number. So, set something less than 500 for this year, perhaps 350 or 400. Try to achieve it by a change in the pattern of grazing use, perhaps through another water development or a change in salting patterns.

Develop grazing plans and schedules

- Based on forage production and utilization data or observations, determine where grazing management changes would be beneficial.
- Determine what improvements in the coming year would be needed to put those changes into effect.
- Build in necessary flexibility to accommodate a poor forage year or like condition.

Review plans for range improvements

- Is your range improvement schedule being met? If not, should the schedule be modified?
- Are improvements meeting your production expectations? Let's say you seeded a new pasture with crested wheatgrass. Are your cows breeding back faster and in more numbers since your new seeding has been used as a breeding unit?
- Are they giving your operation the management flexibility intended?
- Review maintenance schedule for fences, water developments, roads, etc.

Prepared by Thomas E. Bedell, Extension rangeland resources specialist, Oregon State University, Corvallis.

Adjustments in livestock numbers

- Is your forage and range management permitting increases in numbers? If so, advance plans must be made on when and how to purchase, what classes to purchase, and how many to purchase.
- Maintain proper seasonal balance of feed supply and animal demand.
- Apprise your lender of money needs well in advance.
- If you plan to put part of your ranch in a non-use category to permit range improvements, temporary livestock reductions may be necessary.

Leased forage

- Review grazing leases, including public land licenses and permits. Are provisions satisfactory and, if not, what changes are necessary?
- Determine the security of forage sources.
- Examine alternative forage sources.
- If animal grazing changes (e.g., times and numbers) are contemplated and you have a public land grazing permit or license, be certain you coordinate with public land administrators.

Hay production

- Review overall hay management program. For example, be certain the kind and amount of fertilizer used is paying its way. Order supplies well in advance of need.

Calendar of Management Activities

This is intended to be a reminder of major considerations, not a list of things to do. Keep a record of your own activities and modify those in this calendar as they fit your operation. It is very important to keep a daily diary/notebook. With information on how many cattle were put into and taken from pastures on certain dates, a continuous overall use record can be made. Record notes made on utilization checks. The information you record will be quite useful each winter when you review management plans for the coming year.

Winter

Range plants generally will be dormant and main management concerns will be for livestock health and well-being. For livestock that are wintering out, make certain ample forage is available for selection, since nutritive values may be at their yearly low. Cattle with access to palatable shrubs in addition to grasses will be better able to meet their needs than on grasses alone.

- Dormant perennial grasses and forbs should not be damaged by levels of use up to perhaps 90 percent. More damage can occur from physical effects than from defoliation.
- Annual plants will normally be dead so removal will not be damaging. Fall germinated annuals will be too short to provide adequate forage for more than subsistence.
- Removing more than about 75 percent of current twigs will be detrimental to most shrubs. Some energy for maintenance of plant health is stored in twigs.

Spring

- Record the date each species starts to grow. This will aid in projecting when ranges will be safe to begin spring grazing that year. Build an initiation-of-growth record over several years. You will find it helpful in long-range planning.
- Monitor relative development rates of forage plants. This should aid in assessing whether adjustments in grazing plans will be necessary.

- Use crested wheatgrass for first spring pastures, when available. This allows deferring use of native pastures. Crested wheatgrass will be more dependable than native species in providing forage at that time. Cows will receive a flushing effect from crested wheatgrass. Stock at 3 to 4 acres per animal-unit-month (AUM) during early season and 1 to 2 acres/AUM during late spring on full stands in healthy status, as an example.

- Use rough country with yearlings rather than cows and calves if that option is available. Yearlings will cover country better and make more efficient forage use. Weigh yearlings before turning them out so you can determine their performance from range forage.

- Fertilize hay meadows. Leave a check strip so you can determine relative value of fertilizing.

- Assess effects, if any, of winter big game use on spring forage supply. Quantifying the impacts will be necessary if justifiable cases are to be made for reducing the wildlife impacts.

Summer

- Coordinate federally leased forage activities with appropriate range conservationist. Make sure that communication channels are clear and no misunderstandings occur.

- Record the kind of a forage year by range unit.
- Record degree of grazing utilization by date. Are your grazing objectives being met? Degree of grazing use on a particular date will vary. For example, in a good forage year, amount of use will be much less unless stocking rate was increased to make up the difference. Total utilization and where it occurs should reflect true situation.

- Record the actual grazing use so overall grazing capacity can be determined. Combined with trend in range condition, actual use information can be useful in assessing whether target grazing capacities are realistic.

- Record hay production by field. Also record species composition and expected feeding quality.

- Record conditions for hay making.
- Determine value of fertilizing by comparing production in check strips against the remainder of the fertilized unit.

Fall

- Determine animal production: (a) Weights of yearlings and gains on range and/or pasture, (b) Weights of weaned calves.

- Determine percent pregnancy of your cattle. Was there a positive relationship between feed conditions during breeding time and percent pregnancy?

- Make an overall utilization map for all grazed pastures. Use the information that has been developed previously during the season. Use the map in planning for the next year.

- Assess degree of seedling establishment for new range seedings. Are they well rooted? When can grazing be safely scheduled?

- Take soil samples from meadows and other areas you want to fertilize to determine specific nutrient needs.

Continuous management activities

- Monitor grazing activities—make sure grazing plans work right. Use salt and water to distribute grazing. Move a fence location if it will help.

- Watch for incidence of poisonous plants.
- Make utilization checks. Build up information base so you can make better overall use in future years.

- Don't be reluctant to ask your county Extension agent or Soil Conservation Service representative for help. Their jobs are to serve you.