



photos by Author

*Steve Freeman minimizes hay feeding by strip grazing stock-piled fescue. Through MiG practices, he has managed to go a year or two without feeding any hay at all to his cattle.*

# Making Money from the Ground up

—Connie Krider

What is Management intensive Grazing (MiG)? MiG can be described as a means of teaching livestock better eating habits through controlled portioning, while making improvements to the land and forages. For the livestock producers, *management intensive* means working smarter, not harder.

Healthy, growing animals require an abundant supply of balanced, nutritional feed and a clean, accessible water supply. If a large banquet table filled with different types of food, including tempting desserts, was provided to a group of children, and those children were told to eat whatever they want, would it be a surprise to see them go to the desserts first? Now imagine that those same children were only allowed to eat what was originally placed on the banquet table until it was gone. Hunger would eventually force the children to eat the rest of the picked-over food, but not with the same enthusiasm that they first started with. Essentially, that is what happens when cattle are turned into a large area and expected to ration out their own food supply over an extended period of time. The animals eat only the forages that they most prefer until they are no longer an option. Meanwhile, much of the other nutritional forages are wasted due to trampling and manure deposits.

All living things need a rest period, and plants are no exception. In order to rejuvenate and continue to grow, forages need a period of rest when animals are not able to eat them into the ground or trample them. Rotational grazing allows for a forage rest period in one area, while providing the animals with sufficient nutritional intake from another.

Over-grazing plants will destroy the root systems. Once

the root system is gone, the only way to restore the nutritional plant supply to a pasture is through reseeding. Because the natural ecological balance has been altered, soil nutrition and health is jeopardized, making some form of added fertilizer necessary to nourish the newly planted seeds. It takes fuel to spread the fertilizer and plant the seeds. All that expense can be avoided through proper management to begin with. Healthy, productive pastures lead to higher profitability in livestock production. Properly managed grazing habits lead to healthy, productive pastures.

We go to a grocery store or restaurant expecting to find food available to us. Animals on pasture learn that by moving to another pasture they will have a fresh food supply readily available to them. After a few rotations the animals stand at the gate eagerly awaiting access to the new forage, and the physical act of moving the animals from pasture to pasture becomes a quick and easy process. It can be as easy as opening and closing a gate or moving a portable cross-fence. Two hundred animals are as easy to move as twenty. Because the animals are consuming a much higher percent of available, nutritional food source with each move, the food supply goes much further. Manure deposits are more evenly distributed, nourishing the soil more uniformly. Since the animals are moved before the plants are eaten to the ground, plant residue is left to form organic matter.

Plant residue and manure each add organic material to the soil. Organic matter is made up of carbon compounds such as sugars, carbohydrates, fats, and other substances. Micro-organisms break down organic matter, making the nutrients available to living plants. Organic matter is

especially important in providing nitrogen, phosphorus, sulfur, and iron. It also works like a sponge for collecting and storing water. As worms and insects travel underground to feed on the organic matter they aerate the soil. A perfect cycle continues, but only if we don't cause the cycle to be broken. Allowing animals to eat grasses low enough to expose patches of bare ground contributes to soil erosion and loss of organic matter. The cycle is broken, and a healthy, productive pasture starts to become a memory.

Dividing pastures is not rocket science. For most people getting started, the best approach is to go slow and keep it simple. Allow for changes along the way. Start with few permanent fences and more temporary, portable fencing products for sub-dividing pastures. Electric fence is not the only type of fence you can use. It is however the most practical, economical, and efficient. Shop for fencing materials and learn what makes one product better than another. Since fencing is the mainstay of your entire system, the choices you make may very well determine success or failure. Learn from other people's experiences. Visit operations with grazing systems up and running. There are many good books available. Talk to your local NRCS and Soil and Water people to learn about cost-share options. Gather as much information as possible to make educated decisions, but in the end there are no steadfast rules. Make the system



*Once trained to electric fence, sheep can be rotationally grazed using just two strands of polybraid.*




*Cavan Gerrish demonstrates that even a child can easily move fences.*

comfortable for you and fit your operation.

Water is your most limiting factor. It's optimal to have water within 600' of the grazing animals at all times. That can be achieved by using polyethylene water pipe which can be used above ground most of the year. That is a goal, not a requirement. To begin with, lanes may be the best option. Ponds are an option. To keep ponds in good condition, it's best to keep the animals from walking in them, depositing manure and

urine. Use fencing to allow drinking access without room for total body admittance, or pump water from the pond to a tank. Spring development is another nice option.

If you have areas with stock-piled forage, the time to begin is soon. A small portable energizer, if you don't already have an energy source, a couple of reels with polybraid, and some step-in posts are about all you need for winter strip grazing. In winter, allowing the animals to walk back to water is not the same issue that it is during times of the year when protecting plant regrowth is a major consideration. If you don't have grass left to strip graze, it's never too late (or too early) to start planning for next season. 

*David and Connie Krider live in Hartville, Missouri.*

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