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Include Stocking Rates in Pasture Lease Agreements

Other than the lease rate, perhaps the most important aspect of any pasture lease is the stocking rate. Clearly specifying the stocking rate in the lease agreement helps avoid disagreements between both parties and maintains the quality of the pasture.

The stocking rate of a pasture is the quantity of animals on a certain number of acres within a defined time frame. For example, the stocking rate of a pasture might be fifty cows on 150 acres for three months. When establishing stocking rate by number of head, it is important to designate type and weight of livestock to be grazed. Cow calf pairs require more forage than, say, just weaned stocker calves or feeder goats.

Stocking rates can be stated in number of animals or as animal units. Stocking by units is useful for animals that are not necessarily pastured to gain weight, like mature cows or horses. Historically, an animal unit has been described as a 1,000 lb. beef cow with or without a calf less than three months of age. It's assumed that this thousand-pound cow consumes twenty-six pounds of dry matter a day. However, thirty years ago, the definition was updated to an animal unit as the consumption of 17.6 pounds of dry matter per day. Because the definition has changed over time, the lease agreement should be specific.

The big difference here is the reference to a specific species. The traditional animal unit refers to a cow. However, over the decades cow size has *greatly* fluctuated, and with the lack of accessibility to scales, most cattle producers do not know the exact weight of their cows. Additionally, the newer definition, that's over thirty years old, is more species inclusive, making it easier to use for horses, sheep and goats.

Back to how stocking rates factor into lease agreements. Setting pasture rent per acre or by share of gain gives an incentive to the livestock owner to stock heavily. The landowner, on the other hand, may desire light stocking rates to preserve pasture quality. It is in the interest of both parties to develop a lease agreement that achieves maximum economic returns to all resources while maintaining a high pasture quality.

Several ways of expressing stocking rates exist. Stocking rates can be expressed as the average during the lease period since quantity will vary as animals are born or die and weight will change with time. Alternatively, the rent can be established on the basis of animal-days or animal unit-

days to account for the changing quantity and size of stock grazing. Set a maximum stocking rate, so there are never too many livestock at any one time.

Being flexible with stocking rates during times of drought is important. Spelling out a forage monitoring plan in the written lease will be helpful in maintaining pasture quality; include which party will be responsible for checking forage height and soil exposure.

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