



Targeted Grazing with Small Ruminants

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There are a lot of different discussions today related to livestock management and grazing that all seem to be similar and it can be confusing. Terms such as targeted, regenerative, mob, holistic and others are used to describe different types of grazing management that blur together when we start digging into them. Targeted grazing is the use of specific livestock at the specific season, duration, and intensity to accomplish specific goals for your vegetation and landscape. To be effective it will involve other grazing management strategies to achieve these goals.

The goal of targeted grazing is to be able to manage livestock, sheep and goats are ideal for this, to help reduce unwanted plants, manage growth, and reduce bare soil. This results in improved forage stands, more drought resistant pastures, improved nutrition for your animals, reduced risk of erosion by wind or water, and greater sequestration of carbon in the soil, also known as increased organic matter in the soil.

Effective targeted grazing requires that you become familiar with the growth patterns and physiology of the different plants you are working to manage. This includes the desirable and undesirable plants. Grazing at different times and different intensities can favor or harm specific plants. Knowing when to graze and how intense to graze allows you to manage the plants and improve plant diversity. It also allows you to improve root mass which increases drought tolerance in your forage.

To start a targeted grazing program you need to consider several factors. The first is to make sure the livestock you plan to graze fits the program. This includes knowing the preferred grazing practices of the animals, plants that are in the area and other considerations. Sheep are more grazers while goats are more of a browser. If you have desirable trees, an orchard or other structures that are important to your operation, then goats may not be the best choice. Sheep may not be as effective though in controlling woody species. It is important to stick to the plan as it can take up to three years to see the results.

Once you have identified your area and chosen the appropriate livestock for your

needs, you need to make a plan to address the area. Here are the first steps in planning:

1. Identifying the goals and the targeted species for control or benefit.
2. You also need to remember the nutritional needs of your animals. Most plants are highly digestible and most nutritious when they are young and growing. But this may not always be the best time to graze them.
3. Consider the palatability of different plants. Animals prefer specific plants, and this is both a natural and learned behavior. Young animals learn from their dams before weaning what plants are safe to consume and what to avoid. They often will not try plants that are very different in texture, smell, taste, or other attributes unless trained to do so.
4. A final thing to remember when planning is that both desirable and undesirable plants are in the community together. Targeted grazing works to give the desirable plant an advantage. This requires proper selection of the animal, timing, stage of maturity and other aspects to impact the targeted species while favoring the desired species. This is not always easy.

Let us look at an example of a possible situation. You are looking at grazing an old graveyard that has grown up over the years and has a mix of invasive plants and native plants. The concern is that the head stones are not all up right and easy to find so mowing is not possible. The area involved is around ½ acre total.

We start with discussions with the land owner, others, or ourselves that are wanting to clear this area to determine the goal of the grazing project. It can involve different steps and they all need to be identified. The first step in general would be to discover the location of the head stones and other features within the area to allow for additional clearing and maintenance. Another goal is to not do any additional damage to the cite if it can be avoided. With this, we will need to identify the plants on the cite and discuss what will need to be done to get full control of them.

In identifying the plants in the area, we need to look for and identify all plants there, not just the targeted ones. We need to know if

there are any toxic plants and the amount in the area, any desirable plants and what status are they in, i.e., mature trees or native flowering forbs. These can impact what and when you would plan to graze. Also check for things that may harm your animals such as debris and old chemicals in the area before you start.

Once the plants are identified and the goal of controlling, clearing for additional hand removal, or other goals are finalized we will determine the number of animals that the area can support and for how long. Higher numbers for shorter periods can work, but the more pressure you place on an area, the more likely you are to have issues with fencing and consumption of non-target plants or toxic plants. You also need to consider the stage of production of your animals and their nutritional needs for that specific time. Therefore, most companies doing this type of work use castrated males or non-breeding herds to keep the nutritional demands consistent.

The selection of goats to control woody invasive plants is a good choice, if you are looking at some forbs and grass, sheep can do the work. If you are wanting to control or eliminate plants, grazing them before they are mature is desired. You would also need to let them recover some and then graze them again to continue to deplete the root reserves.

Realize that if plants are not defoliated, they can recover some and the rate of recovery does change so plan this in your timing.

If plants are taller than the animals can fully defoliate, they will need to be manually cut down to get good control. After the first grazing, cut them close to the ground and allow them to sucker out, the goats or sheep will then graze the suckers and be able to deplete the plant reserves. This should be included in the planning. Do not poison the stumps if you plan to graze the area again unless the product used is labeled for use in pastures as the animals may chew the stumps.

When grazing the area check to make sure the animals are consuming the desired plants. Also watch closely to know when the targeted species is consumed, and animals may start to graze desired plants you want to keep in the area.

You will need to balance the grazing of targeted species and the need to allow the desired species thrive. The growing seasons may be different or the same for the different species so be aware of this. Plan for other areas to be available to give the desired species a chance to grow and store reserves.

Finally, it is critical to remember that targeted grazing is not a one pass solution to the issues. You will need to graze the area multiple times and may need to graze over

multiple years as well.

One final thing, targeted grazing can also be used to maintain areas around utility lines, pump stations, and other locations. These areas often need control of grass height and weeds but are difficult to mow with conventional equipment. Watch for wires and other items in these areas that may be damaged by your animals moving around or chewing on them before you start. Be sure to monitor the forage availability and move animals as needed to new grazing. Also make sure the company understands that grazing is not the same as mowing, the results are often not as uniform, but will be effective over time.

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