

## **Time To Start Evaluation of Native Range Condition**

### **AGRI-VIEWS**

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

We are at the end of the traditional native pasture grazing season. Cattle are off of grass or will be within a few more weeks. The best time to evaluate the pasture and more importantly the management of the pasture is now. There are a couple of key principles that you need to keep in mind when it comes to pasture management.

The first one is that the pasture, meaning all the plants that grow in that area of land, responds to the management that it is given. If you put no cattle in the pasture for the entire growing season, at the end of the season there will be a lot of forage (plant material) present. If you stocked the pasture at ten times the recommended rate, there wouldn't be much of any forage left standing at the end of the season. If the pasture was in good shape at the start of the season and you stocked it at the recommended rate of 1 cow and calf per 8 acres, there should be adequate forage to easily carry a fire next spring, assuming we had normal rainfall. What you see left in the pasture at this time is directly related to how you managed that pasture.

The second fundamental principle is that "weeds" and brush don't take over a pasture that is well managed. The weeds don't come in and crowd out the grass in a well managed pasture. Weeds, brush and trees are opportunistic. Most of them will only get a foot hold where there is little competition from the desirable vegetation (native grass and forbs). If a pasture is being regularly overgrazed, it tells us so by a noticeable change in the plant community in that pasture. That change is telling us that we need to adjust our management and reduce stocking rates. It isn't telling us that we need to spray herbicides, it's telling us that it needs a little rest. Often total rest isn't the answer either, just a much lighter stocking rate. A common misconception is that grazing a pasture is bad for the plants. On the contrary, many of our native grasses and forbs respond favorably to some grazing pressure.

In October or early November, you need to take a tour of your pastures. Drive, walk or ride the fence line. Go up and over the hills, pay close attention to areas where you water, salt or feed. These areas will always have extra grazing pressure. But look at the entire pasture and determine how well and how evenly forage was utilized. Extremely uneven grazing often indicates a need to possibly move water or salt or feeding sites. It may indicate a need to do some cross fencing to keep cattle in underutilized areas.

If you see very little growth of any plant, then there is a very serious problem. If you see no grass but lots of forbs, there's a slightly less serious problem. If you can't see anything because of the cedar trees and brush, then we need to talk! Sometimes it can be very helpful to make a temporary grazing exclusion by fencing out a ten by ten foot area for a season to see what grows in a pasture when it isn't grazed. It can be a wonderful learning tool!

By late winter or early spring, it becomes much tougher to evaluate grazing pressure and forage utilization. You need to do that now while the year is fresh in your mind. Write down how many of cattle you had in the pasture and what they weighed going in and coming out. Then we'll know what our new target stocking rates might be. If you aren't sure what you need to do, then give me a call and we'll view the pasture together, review the management over the past year or two and determine what direction we need to go. But you need to get that baseline data so we know what way you're headed!