

Removing Cattle From Pastures

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Before too much longer I will likely start getting phone calls from pasture owners concerned about cattle still being in pastures and causing damage to the pasture. There'll usually be comments like "shouldn't they be out by now?" or "shouldn't I get extra payment for them being in the pasture longer?" or something of a similar nature. Many of these questions come from a misunderstanding of the Kansas ag lease law but there's also misunderstanding of the nature of the plants that are in those pastures. Let's start with the ag lease law portion of this.

Unless you have a written lease that has specific in and out dates, the tenant technically has the pasture until March 1st. All oral ag leases run for one year from March 1 to March 1 and renew automatically unless proper termination notice is served. The tenant has control and access to the property during that full time including controlling hunting. With a written lease there can be very specific dates of the lease, like May 1 to October 15 for example. In that case the cattle would need to be out by October 15th unless special provisions have been made.

I'm not sure where the idea developed that grazing late into the fall would hurt the native grass pastures but it isn't quite accurate. Damage to pastures, over-grazing if you will, is going to occur in late July, August and September. Native warm-season grasses and plants have gone dormant enough by early October that additional grazing is not going to cause a shortage of carbohydrate root reserves. The very essence of early intensive stocking or double stocking is that up until about mid July, you can just about grub that grass into the ground. Pull the cattle off in early July and let the pasture rest for the remainder of the summer and you just about can't tell the difference. Remember a couple of year ago when it was so dry early and nothing was growing? It started raining in July and by October 1st it looked like June 1st.

We encourage cutting of native hay to be done from mid-July to mid-August. Sure, the quality of the hay produced then is much better, but we also want about six weeks of growth post harvest to allow the grass to regrow it's leaves and restore the carbohydrate root reserves so that it's got a full tank of gas going into the winter. You can rest a pasture all through the growing season and then turn cattle out into it in October and let them graze and trample it flat and not hurt it, as long as you have cattle off by May 1 and let it grow ungrazed all summer long.

Damage to pastures occurs in that mid to late summer period. I'm a firm believer that pastures should be evaluated on August 1st. If there is an obvious shortage of grass then there needs to be partial or total de-stocking so that the grass can recover, at least in part by October 1st. Stocking rates in many pastures needs to be examined. Over the past 50 years average cow size has increased 20% to 30% but in many cases stocking rates haven't changed. It's simple math; a cow that is 20% to 30% bigger is going to eat 20% to 30% more forage. Rates need to be adjusted and this is based not on acres in the pasture but on acres of usable grass in the pasture. Woody brush and trees don't count in those acres!

Rather than being concerned that cattle aren't off a pasture by October 15th or November 1st or any other date, I'd like pasture owners to be more concerned with the total number of head in the pasture and the condition of the pasture on August 1st. Include in a written lease in and out dates, evaluation dates AND stocking rates. If you charge pasture lease by the acre, consider changing to leasing on a per head basis and if necessary, reduce the number of head allowed to improve pasture condition. Contact me at the Extension Office for more details and considerations on pasture management and pasture leasing.