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Proper Range Use: How to Rate Use on Your Native Pastures

Cooperative Extension South Dakota State University

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"Proper" Range Use

How To Rate Use On Your Native Pastures

Cooperative Extension Service
South Dakota State University
Brookings, South Dakota
"Proper" Range Use
How To Rate Use On Your Native Pastures

By E. J. Dyksterhuis, Extension Range Specialist

"Proper" usually means appropriate or right. In range livestock production Proper Use requires careful regulation of the stocking rate; including, at times, no stocking if deferment of grazing is opportune.

The aims are:

(a) to restore or maintain high production of forage.
(b) a favorable balance among plant species,
(c) efficient use of the forage produced; and,
(d) high animal production through the years.

Range use is under your observation from month to month. Most of a year’s plant growth on range is made in only a few months. During this brief period, plant growth must be greater than grazing use. The amount greater depends upon numbers being grazed and how long that particular range is to be used.

Therefore, grazing is not balanced with range growth during the growing season. Instead, the interest is in whether the growth of the season will be too closely grazed before the end of the planned grazing season.

The degree of range use is best tentatively judged in early summer, with a final rating in late autumn. Adjustments in numbers among pastures can be based on this tentative judgment of how the pasture will look by fall. Close use in late autumn usually means that there were spring and summer mistakes in judgment—in trying to fit stocking rates to the season’s growth.

Moving some or all animals out of an overstocked pasture near the middle of the growing season can permit ending the season with proper use. With no more than Moderate to Full use in late autumn we can be assured of: (a) least plant losses in winter, (b) good moisture storage from snow-catch and spring rains, (c) ample plant food stored in the roots, and (d) earlier and more vigorous growth in spring.

For these reasons, stocking should be manipulated in summer, among pastures or by sales, in order to enter the winter with a planned degree of use.
You can rate the use on each of your native pastures with the following guide. One rating should be given for the entire pasture. For this rating, ignore ungrazed areas that animals cannot be expected to graze. Correct this with fencing, herding, stockwater; but not by considering the pasture underused with facilities as they are.

Around the first of November is the best time to assign final yearly use ratings. At other seasons, consider how each pasture will look by November 1 with your stocking plans and with ordinary growth.

In the table of Use Ratings, pick the name that seems best to fit the whole native pasture you have in mind. Then check by reading the description, not only of the degree you checked, but also of the next greater or lesser degree of use.

### TABLE OF USE RATING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use rating</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unused</td>
<td>No livestock use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slight</td>
<td>Appears practically undisturbed when viewed obliquely. Only favored areas near water, trails, or shade and choice plants are grazed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Most all of accessible range shows grazing. Little or no use of poor forage. Little evidence of trailing to grazing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full (This or less use is Proper Use)</td>
<td>All fully accessible areas are grazed. The major sites have key forage species properly utilized (about ½ taken and ½ left). Points of concentration with overuse limited to between 5% and 10% of accessible area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close</td>
<td>All accessible range plainly shows use and major sections are closely cropped. Livestock forced to use much poor, dry and stemmy forage considering seasonal preference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>Key forage species almost completely used. Low-value forage carrying grazing load. Trampling damage is widespread in accessible areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme</td>
<td>Range appears stripped of vegetation. Key forage species are weak from continual grazing of regrowth. Poor quality forage closely grazed. Livestock trail great distances for forage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These use ratings correspond with removals in percent, roughly as follows:

- Unused: No use of current year’s growth
- Slight: 0-20% of current year’s growth
- Moderate: 20-40% of current year’s growth
- Full: 40-60% of current year’s growth
- Close: 60-80% of current year’s growth
- Severe: 80-100% of current year’s growth
- Extreme: Removal of new plus old growth, together exceeding total growth of a specified growing season or year.

The most use possible on native pastures (ranges) while maintaining production has received much research in the United States and Canada during the past 20 years. There can be little doubt that grazing more than 40-60% of each year’s growth is self defeating. Therefore 40-60% grazing use (take half and leave half), if grazed during the growing season, is called Full use. Where use is entirely during winter (complete dormancy) proper use may be Close (60-80% of the year’s growth).

If you want to restore a run-down range, then end the growing season with less than the Full use necessary for maintenance. For the most rapid improvement, a range pasture must be Unused until late autumn, after which the standing “hay” may be grazed, with a protein supplement, as strictly winter pasture. This often is the most economical way to improve range and may need to be continued for more than one year.

If the kinds of plants on a range are the best natural combination the soil and climate (range site) can produce, then maintenance under Full use is appropriate for most summer pastures most of the time.
For rangelands in native cover, the proper degree of use each year, including well planned deferrals, is the most effective yet least expensive range management practice.

Proper Range Use must be included with any other range management practice or that practice will fail. Seedings will be lost, weed growth will return, furrows and pits will seal with mud instead of supporting the taller grasses. No amount of stockwater, fences, salt and minerals will substitute for a healthy plant cover.

Full Use is not necessarily Proper Use. Close Use may be feasible and possible when native grasses are grazed only during winter dormancy. Moderate Use has frequently produced more net profit through greater gains on fewer animals. Full Use is intended for maintenance of the stand. It never is as beneficial for improvement of stand in natural pastures (ranges) as are lesser degrees of use.

Advantages of reserve old-growth for use in drought years may account for the Moderate Use seen on most ranching enterprises marked by stability of ownership and evidences of higher than average returns through decades.

The "light," "moderate," and "heavy" stocking rates of grazing trails, at range experiment stations in the United States and Canada, should not be confused with degrees of use. In drought years, a "moderate" rate may result in Close Use.

Ranchers applying the heavy rate usually find it unprofitable over the longer term because it is necessary to reduce numbers, buy feed, or find additional range during droughts—the least favorable time. In contrast, ranchers who ordinarily practice Moderate Use may even cut hay on ranges in the best years, and go through all but extreme droughts without great costs or losses.

Ranges that are overstocked will be overused by the end of the season—unless the stocking rate is reduced at midseason. Ranges that are overused year after year soon show signs of overgrazing (increase in kinds or amounts of weedy species).

For a professional check on your judgment of range use contact your County Agricultural Agent or other range specialist.

This is one of five new Fact Sheets for ranchers and livestock farmers, specifically aimed at common problems of ranges and tame pastures, published by the Cooperative Extension Service of South Dakota State University, Brookings. Titles of these are:

"Proper" Range Use: How To Rate Use on Your Native Pastures.

Reseed Native Range Grasses? or Plant a Tame Pasture?

My Rangelands: What Kinds? How Good?

Range Seedings: Kinds that Succeed and Kinds That Fail.

Graze Longer and Feed Less Roughage: Systems to Balance Native and Tame Pastures With Seasonal Needs.