

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

**PRESCRIBED GRAZING
(Ac.)
CODE 528**

DEFINITION

Managing the controlled harvest of vegetation primarily with grazing and/or browsing animals.

PURPOSE

This practice is applied to accomplish one or more of the following purposes as determined by the land steward:

- Improve or maintain the health and vigor of plant communities.
- Improve or maintain the availability of quality forage for livestock health and productivity.
- Improve or maintain water quality and quantity.
- Reduce accelerated soil erosion, and maintain or improve soil condition.
- Improve or maintain the quantity and quality of food and/or cover available for wildlife through increased diversity and health of plant composition.
- Promote economic stability through grazing land sustainability and increased harvest efficiency and utilization.

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

This practice applies to all lands where grazing/browsing animals are managed and shall be a part of all RMS plans involving ruminant livestock or horses.

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

Removal of herbage will be in accordance with site production limitations, rate of plant growth and the physiological needs of forage plants including resting period to replenish and maintain appropriate reserves.

Manage kind of animal, animal number, grazing distribution, length of grazing periods and timing of use to provide efficient forage harvest and sufficient deferment from grazing for rest during the growing period.

Protect soil, water, air, plant and animal resources when locating livestock feeding, handling and watering facilities.

Manage grazing/browsing animals to maintain adequate vegetative cover on pastures with special emphasis on sensitive areas (i.e. riparian, wetland, habitats of concern, karst areas).

Additional Criteria: The following additional criteria apply depending on which of the purposes are being addressed.

Additional Criteria to Improve or Maintain the Health and Vigor of Plant Communities.

Duration and intensity of grazing will be based on desired plant health and expected productivity of *key forage species to meet

management unit

Conservation practice standards are reviewed periodically and updated if needed. To obtain the current version of this standard, contact your Natural Resources Conservation Service [State Office](#) or visit the [electronic Field Office Technical Guide](#).

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objectives. Key components to control are stock density, grazing period and time for regrowth.

Adjust grazing periods and/or stocking rates (stock density) as well as rest period to meet the desired objectives for the plant communities and the associated resources, including the grazing animal.

Schedule livestock movements based on rate of plant growth, available forage and utilization, not calendar dates. Preferred rotations move animals at least twice each week to prevent spot grazing and subsequent weakening of the plant population.

Periodic rest from grazing is needed to maintain or restore the desired plant community and is especially important following episodic events, such as wildfire, severe drought or other stresses such as severe overgrazing.

Additional Criteria to Improve or Maintain Quantity and Quality of Forage for Livestock Health and Productivity

Plan grazing to match forage quantity and quality with goals of the livestock producer. A forage/livestock balance can be estimated by comparing animal demand with available forage based on farm conditions from grazing records, calculations using a “forage stick”, clipping and weighing to determine yields, or using average yields in approved computer programs.

Livestock will be provided sufficient forage through grazing to meet their nutritional needs so that they will be able to grow and/or reproduce and be less prone to disease, parasites and other stressors such as temperature extremes. When availability of quality forage for grazing is inadequate to meet nutritional needs, harvested forages and other supplemental feedstuffs will be provided.

Additional Criteria to Improve or Maintain Water Quality and Quantity

Maintain adequate ground cover and plant density to maintain or improve filtering capacity of the vegetation. This will be applied to the whole farm through appropriate management of pastures and not just buffer areas or other fragile areas such as shallow soils or steep terrain.

Minimize concentrated livestock areas to enhance nutrient distribution and improve or maintain ground cover. Whenever possible, use sacrifice paddocks surrounded by properly managed paddocks for animal concentration and/or feeding and rotate those areas annually.

Additional Criteria to Reduce Soil Erosion and Maintain Soil Condition

Maintain adequate ground cover, litter and canopy to protect soil surface from eroding.

Increase organic matter to hold moisture and nutrients and/or improve infiltration and soil condition.

Minimize concentrated livestock areas, trailing, and trampling to reduce soil compaction, excess runoff and erosion.

Additional Criteria to Improve or Maintain Food and/or Cover for Wildlife Species of Concern

Manage for diverse plant communities through proper grazing and adequate rest periods. Manage plant height, structure and density for desired wildlife habitat.

Provide rest from grazing on a percentage of the land strategically located according to the need for and availability of nesting habitat during the critical nesting periods.

Control or eliminate only those plants that are noxious or that pose a significant challenge to providing forage in appropriate quality and quantity.

Additional Criteria to Promote Economic Stability through Grazing Land Sustainability.

Evaluate the economics of the forage system and associated infrastructure by considering harvest efficiency, return on investment of practices such as fertilizer use and weed control through herbicide use compared to fencing costs; include differences in machinery needed to produce forages under the various systems.

Develop a grazing system that provides forage for as much of the year as possible to minimize supplemental feed cost. Extending the grazing season can be accomplished through grazing management as well as species selection.

Develop a contingency plan to ensure resource management and economic feasibility without resource degradation. For example, expanding a grazing system to a daily rotation can stretch forage supplies and limit overgrazing.

Reduce the loss of livestock from toxic and poisonous plants. Livestock rarely consume toxic plants when adequate forage supplies are available.

CONSIDERATIONS

Utilization or stubble height target levels are tools that can be used in conjunction with monitoring to help ensure that resource conservation and producer objectives are met.

When needed, rest areas for a period of time to ensure the success of prescribed fire, brush control, seeding or other conservation practices.

Where practical, start the grazing sequence in a different management unit each growing season and harvest different areas for hay on a rotating

basis.

When weeds are a significant problem, prescribed grazing with a high stock density could be implemented as part of a pest management program to protect desired plant communities. Weeds (forbs) are desirable for some species for livestock (sheep and particularly goats) and should be considered when determining the magnitude of a weed problem. Additionally, some forbs have high nutritional value and other properties. The question may relate to whether or not the particular weed is eaten by any species of livestock on the farm.

Livestock feeding, handling, and watering facilities should be designed and installed in a manner to improve and/or maintain animal distribution. These facilities should also be designed and installed to minimize stress, the spread of disease, parasites, contact with harmful organisms and toxic plants.

Supplemental feed and/or mineral requirements should be balanced with the forage consumption to meet the desired nutritional level for the kind and class of grazing livestock.

Parasite impact on livestock can be reduced by rotational grazing that is timed to break the life cycle of the parasite and result in quick decomposition of manure piles. Additionally, not overgrazing or grazing near manure piles decreases parasite larvae ingestion.

Encouraging the increase of dung beetles and other “soil livestock” is also beneficial.

Prescribed grazing should consider the needs of other enterprises utilizing the same land, such as wildlife and recreational uses.

Consider improving carbon sequestration in biomass and soils through management of grazing to produce the desired results. Soil sampling to include monitoring of soil organic matter is suggested.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Operation. Prescribed Grazing will be applied on a continuing basis throughout the occupation period of all grazing units. Other practices such as Forage Harvest Management, Pasture and Hay Planting, Nutrient Management, Pest Management and Prescribed Burning may be used to improve the effectiveness of the grazing plan and the overall conservation management system.

Adjustments will be made and flexibility maintained as needed to ensure that the goals and objectives of the prescribed grazing strategy are met.

Maintenance. All facilitating practices (e.g. Fence (382), Pest Management (595), Water Facility, etc.) that are needed to affect adequate grazing distribution as planned by this practice standard will be maintained in good working order.

Evaluation. A prescribed grazing program is met if pastures are grazed with an effort to allow plants to recover from the grazing or harvesting defoliation and prevent spot grazing. For this

reason, continuous grazing is generally not considered to be a practical option for prescribed grazing. However, continuous grazing can be used with a low stocking rate and appropriate clipping or harvest of forage to keep mature plants under control and actively growing. The harvest efficiency of continuous grazing or a slow rotation is considerably lower than a more intensive rotational grazing program and should be considered. A rest period should be adequate to replenish root reserves. Pastures that are grazed below the suggested minimum heights will require longer rest periods. The rest period should be adequate to return pastures to adequate availability for grazing. This is 6-10 inches for cool season grasses and 4-8 inches for warm season grasses.

Items to look for in evaluation include observing to see if a rotational grazing program is in effect. Gates to pastures open and cattle with continuous access to them is not prescribed grazing. Using a pasture condition score sheet could be helpful in assuring plant health and determining the adequacy of a prescribed grazing program.