

DEALING WITH A MOB MENTALITY – PART I

December 2010 Georgia Cattleman
Dennis Hancock, Forage Extension Specialist
The University of Georgia

A subject that has garnered a lot of press in the cattle industry lately is a grazing method called “mob grazing” or “ultra-high stock density grazing.” News stories about this strategy can be found in just about every beef industry magazine (this magazine, I’m proud to say, being a notable exception). Almost all of the articles in the popular press about ultra-high stock density grazing give it a positive spin. As a scientist, I am increasingly alarmed by some of the claims being made and how the proponents of ultra-high stock density grazing have garnered so much publicity. It seems that some media outlets these days can turn anything that goes against conventional wisdom (and in this case, common sense) into a new religion, complete with proselytes. Starting with this month’s article and continuing in coming months, I pick through the spin and raise several of the issues that I have with the ultra-high stock density grazing rhetoric.

Ultra-High Stock Density Grazing Methodology

Before beginning, it is important to clarify the terminology. The terms “mob grazing” and “ultra-high stock density grazing” are essentially synonyms for the practice of grazing large herds in a very small area for a very short time. A common example is confining 200 cow-calf pairs on one acre for 8 hours. Though both terms are used in the popular press, I prefer the term “ultra-high stock density grazing” because it is a bit more descriptive of this new practice.

Of course, mob grazing is nothing new. Very high stocking densities like this have been used for millennia. In fact, we still commonly recommend the practice of “flash grazing” areas as part of some management objectives (e.g., for weed control purposes, to prepare a seedbed, etc.).

However, the type of “ultra-high stock density grazing” currently being pushed in the popular press is one where grazing is not performed on an area until the forage stand is fully mature. This means that a given acre of land may only be grazed two or three times per year and that, when it is grazed, the animals are forced to eat low quality forage.

Hopefully, this overview of ultra-high stock density grazing has already caused you to see a few red flags (i.e., forcing cattle to eat mature/low quality forage, grazing an area only two or three times a year, moving cattle every 8 – 24 hrs, etc.). In the interest of fairness, however, I would encourage you to do an Internet search for “mob grazing” and “ultra-high stock density grazing” so that you can read for yourself what the proponents of this practice say about it.

Ultra-High Stock Density May Mean Moving Cattle Daily (at least)

If you have seen any of my presentations, you likely have heard me say that we must do more to manage grazing and that rotational grazing is much more efficient than the typical continuous stocking practiced by most beef cattle producers. So, yes, I definitely advocate moving cattle. But, I recommend grazing systems where one would move cattle two to three times per week, not two to three times each day!

The best way to compare grazing methods is on the basis of forage use efficiency, which is the percentage of the forage that is produced (or could be produced) that actually makes it into the mouth of the animal. The forage use efficiency of continuous stocking (1 or 2 large pastures and no management of grazing) is typically 30-40%. By transitioning to moderate rotational grazing methods, this efficiency increases to 50-60%! Of course, this can be further increased

with daily rotation methods. But, under the extremes of ultra-high stock density grazing (i.e., mature forage, trampling, soiling, etc.), even the proponents of the practice admit that forage use efficiency actually drops back to the 50-60% range. So, what is the point of moving cattle more often but not increasing efficiency? Plus, there is a real potential for the animal to lose condition and weight. (More on that in the coming months.)

Ultra-High Stock Density ≠ More Animals per Acre

A high stocking density does not necessarily mean a high stocking rate. Here is where some people get confused, so bare with me as I explain the difference. Stocking density is the number of animals (or amount of live weight) on a given acreage at a given point in time. In contrast, stocking rate is the average number of animals (or amount of live weight) on a given acreage over a the whole year.

As was mentioned previously, a common example of a stocking density used in ultra-high stock density grazing is 200 cow-calf pairs on one acre for 8 hours. Since this requires moving the cattle to a new acre three times per day, this roughly equates to about 67 cow-calf pairs per acre during one day ($200/3 = 66.7$). Yes, this is a very high stocking density.

However, the premise of ultra-high stock density grazing is that a given acre of land will only be grazed two or three times per year. So, to get the stocking rate, we would need to multiply by 3 grazings per year and divide by 365 days per year. This gives us an average stocking rate of 0.55 cow-calf pairs/acre ($67 \times 3/365 = 0.55$). The typical stocking rate in Georgia's continuously stocked pastures is about 1 cow-calf pair for every 2 acres (i.e., 0.5 cow-calf pairs/acre). Consequently, switching to ultra-high stock density grazing is not necessarily going to substantially increase the number of cow-calf pairs that one can carry on a given acreage. In contrast, switching to a moderate rotational grazing method has been proven (with actual research) to increase carrying capacity from 0.5 cow-calf pairs per acre to 0.60-0.70 cow-calf pairs per acre!

To Be Continued...

We'll pick up here in upcoming articles wherein I will raise additional issues about the practice of ultra-high stock density grazing. These will include my arguments against reducing the selectivity of the grazing animal when forcing them to eat low quality forage, a discussion of the half-truths of extended recovery periods and impacts on soil and forage productivity, and a questioning of the sustainability of ultra-high stock density grazing.

Until then, if you have additional forage management questions, visit our website at www.georgiaforages.com or contact your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office (call 1-800-ASK-UGA1).