



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Range and Pasture Section

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Summary of Livestock Grazing Systems Used in the Western United States

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Specialized grazing systems were first conceptualized in the United States at the turn of the 20th century and became a major focus of range researchers and managers by the 1950s. In the intermountain West, deferred-rotation received considerable attention during the 1950s, followed by rest-rotation during the 1970s. More recently, rangeland managers have used short duration grazing to more intensively control when and where domestic animals graze rangelands.

When properly applied, grazing systems are powerful tools that can help rangeland and livestock managers achieve management objectives related to rangeland and livestock production (e.g., forage production, average daily gain), as well as those related to ecosystem structure (e.g., wildlife habitat) and function (erosion control, water quantity and quality). However, selection of the proper grazing system is contingent upon the unique setting in which it is applied (e.g., topography, soils, vegetation types, climate). The objectives of this article are to provide an overview of several grazing management systems or approaches that have been used on rangelands in the western U.S. and to summarize the conditions under which they may be applicable (Table 1).

Continuous and Season-Long Grazing

Continuous or season-long grazing is technically not a grazing system *per se* because there is no attempt to leave a portion of the range ungrazed by livestock for at least part of the growing season. With continuous grazing, stocking rate must be light during the growing season because adequate forage must be left to carry animals through the dormant season.

Under light stocking, animals are allowed maximum dietary selectivity throughout the year. For example, cattle and sheep preferentially select forbs (e.g., broad-leaved plants) during certain times of the year, which

can greatly reduce grazing pressure on perennial grasses. Rotation systems that restrict livestock from part of the range during the growing season can waste much of the forb crop because some forb species complete their life cycle quickly and become unpalatable after maturation.

Another advantage of continuous or season-long grazing over rotation systems is that livestock are not moved from one pasture to another. Moving livestock too frequently can reduce animal production (weight gains, calf crops, etc.). Some have speculated that desirable plants, particularly grasses, will be grazed excessively under continuous or season-long grazing. However, research does not support this view when proper stocking is implemented.

Continuous or season-long grazing works best on flat, well-watered areas (e.g., watering points no more than 2 miles apart) where precipitation occurs as several light rains throughout the summer, and where most plants have some grazing value (e.g., the shortgrass prairie, northern mixed prairies of the Great Plains). Continuous or season-long grazing also has worked well in the California annual grasslands where annual plants need only to set seed each year to maintain themselves, in contrast to perennial grasses that store carbohydrates for use during dormancy, and for use during the initiation of growth when dormancy breaks.

Deferred-Rotation

Deferred-rotation grazing was first developed in 1895 and later implemented in the early 20th century by Arthur Sampson (the “father of range management”) in the Blue Mountains of Oregon. Sampson’s system involved dividing the range into two pastures with each pasture receiving deferment until seed set every other year. Several modifications of deferred-rotation have evolved using more than two pastures, however, its key feature is that each pasture periodically receives

Table 1. Distinguishing features of grazing systems used in the western United States and Canada, and situations where they may be applicable (see text for details).

Type of grazing system	Distinguishing features	May be applicable when you have...
Continuous or season-long	Continuously graze an area the entire year (continuous), or the entire growing season (season-long). These are not grazing systems <i>per se</i> (see text).	...flat, well-watered rangeland, where most plants have similar grazing value, with a uniform precipitation pattern that encourages regrowth. ...also, may be applicable in some areas of the California annual grasslands.
Deferred-rotation	Periodically defers each pasture in the rotation. Animals are rotated through the other pastures on a seasonal basis.	...distribution problems where animals habitually overuse "convenience areas" (e.g., riparian areas), or where there are multiple use objectives.
Rest-rotation	Periodically rests each pasture in the rotation for 12 months. Animals are rotated through the other pastures on a seasonal basis.	...generally, same criteria as deferred-rotation.
Santa Rita	Modification of the rest-rotation system to where each pasture receives rest during both the early spring and "summer-monsoon" growing periods 2 out of every 3 years.	...semi-desert grassland where forage production is irregular and heavily influenced by midsummer "monsoons" and winter precipitation.
Seasonal suitability	Diverse vegetation types are partitioned and grazing rotation is managed based on seasonal changes in forage production.	...diverse vegetation types that can be partitioned and managed as separate units based on seasonal differences in plant phenology, forage quantity, and forage quality.
Best pasture	Matches cattle movements to vagaries of forage production due to irregular precipitation patterns or disparate range (ecological) sites.	...irregular forage production due to spotty precipitation patterns, or grazing areas that require special management due to species differences in forage production and/or resistance to grazing.
Short duration	Frequently move a single cattle herd through multiple, smaller pastures allowing for relatively brief periods of rest in previously grazed pastures. Graze/rest periods directly linked to plant growth rates and number of pastures.	...generally, the same criteria as for continuous and season-long (but see text).

deferment (typically every 2 to 4 years, depending on the number of pastures).

Plant response in a deferred-rotation grazing system was superior to continuous or season-long grazing in several studies conducted in the western U.S., but *animal performance* did not differ. In the tallgrass prairie, individual animal performance decreased in a deferred-rotation system compared to continuous grazing possibly due to lower forage quality (e.g., older, more mature forage) in the deferred pastures. However, deferring grazing until after seed set, when perennial grasses tend to be more grazing tolerant, may allow higher stocking rates and compensate for lower gain per animal without damaging rangeland resources.

Deferred-rotation has been used as a tool to take advantage of seasonal preferences that livestock show for different classes of riparian plant species. For example, spring or early summer deferment has been implemented to reduce livestock use of riparian herbaceous plants such as grasses, sedges, and rushes, while summer and

fall deferment has been used to reduce livestock use of riparian shrubs and trees.

Seasonal deferred-rotation, as described here, draws on our knowledge of animal foraging behavior to exclude livestock from riparian areas during the season(s) in which they are most likely to prefer either herbaceous or woody plants. Thus, deferred rotation can help sustain a balance between herbaceous and woody plants by alternating grazing and browsing pressure in ways that inhibit one life form from gaining a competitive advantage over the other.

Rest-Rotation

The rest-rotation system was designed by Gus Hormay of the U.S. Forest Service and was first implemented in the 1950s and 1960s. Although the original system was designed to rotate grazing and rest periods among five pastures using one to three herds over a 5-year cycle (Hormay 1970), other variations of rest-rotation have

Table 2. A schedule of a three-pasture/3-year rest rotation grazing system.

	Pasture 1	Pasture 2	Pasture 3
Year 1	Full graze ¹	Graze after seed set	Rest
Year 2	Graze after seed set	Rest	Full graze
Year 3	Rest	Full graze	Graze after seed set

¹Refers to grazing throughout the growing season, at the time when plants are actively growing.

used three or four pastures in a 3- to 4-year cycle (Table 2). Hence, under rest-rotation, one or two pastures are rested the entire year while the remaining pastures are grazed seasonally, depending on the number of pastures and herds.

For example, one pasture in a 3-year, three-pasture rest-rotation might be managed as follows during a 3-year cycle: (1) graze the entire year or growing season, (2) defer, then graze, and (3) rest. In this example, about one-third of the range would be rested each year.

Rest-rotation has shown superiority over continuous and season-long grazing on steep mountain ranges where cattle may heavily use riparian areas under all grazing strategies. Rest provides an opportunity for vegetation around natural or developed water to recover and helps meet multiple use objectives (e.g., providing hiding cover for birds and mammals, leaving ungrazed areas for public viewing and enjoyment). Hence, rest-rotation provides many of the advantages for riparian habitats discussed under deferred-rotation.

Also, rested pastures provide forage for emergency use during severe drought years, and provide opportunities to implement relatively long-term rangeland improvement practices (e.g., burning, reseeding, brush control) during scheduled rest periods. However, a disadvantage of all grazing systems that periodically rest pastures from livestock grazing is that deer, elk, and other wild herbivores may graze “rested” pastures, sometimes negating some or all of the benefit of rest or deferment from livestock grazing.

Other disadvantages cited for rest-rotation are reduced individual animal performance due to forced animal movements from pasture to pasture, and increased stocking density in grazed pastures, which can reduce dietary

selectivity. However, this criticism may emanate more from failure to properly adjust stocking rates to compensate for resting 20 to 40 percent of the total grazing area each year, rather than a definite failure of rest-rotation.

For example, research on mountainous range in northeastern Oregon showed that cattle weight gains per hectare or per animal did not differ among rest-rotation, deferred-rotation, and season-long grazing systems when utilization (“the proportion of current year’s forage consumed or destroyed by grazing animals,” Glossary Revision Special Committee 1989) averaged about 35 percent for each system over a 5-year period.

Santa Rita

The Santa Rita grazing system is basically a one-herd, three-pasture, 3-year, rest-rotation system (Table 3) that was modified for midsummer rainfall and concomitant forage production patterns that typically occur in the hot semi-desert grasslands in southeastern Arizona (Martin and Severson 1988). A 3-year rotational schedule for one pasture is as follows: (1) rest 12 months (November to October), (2) graze 4 months (November to February), (3) rest 12 months (March to February), and (4) graze 8 months (March to October). Each pasture receives rest during both early spring and “summer-monsoon” growing periods for 2 out of every 3 years, but each year’s forage production is also grazed (first year’s growth is grazed in winter).

A full year of rest before spring grazing allows residual vegetation to accumulate, which helps protect new spring forage from heavy grazing. Target utilization levels in grazed pastures are 30 to 40 percent. Martin and Severson (1988) concluded that the Santa Rita system promoted recovery of ranges in poor condition, but had little advantage over moderate continuous grazing on ranges in good condition.

Seasonal Suitability

A common practice of seasonal suitability grazing systems is to partition and manage diverse vegetation types that differ due to elevation, ecological site, ecological condition, or precipitation, and to move animals based on seasonal forage production in the partitioned vegetation types. Disparate vegetation types are typically fenced, but livestock movements can also be controlled by turning on (or off) watering points, a technique most commonly employed in the southwestern U.S.

Table 3. A schedule of a three-pasture/3-year Santa Rita grazing system.

	Year 1			Year 2			Year 3		
	Winter	Spring	Summer	Winter	Spring	Summer	Winter	Spring	Summer
Pasture 1	R	G	G	R	R	R	G	R	R
Pasture 2	G	R	R	R	G	G	R	R	R
Pasture 3	R	R	R	G	R	R	R	G	G

Modified from Martin and Severson 1988.

In southwestern deserts, seasonal suitability systems use creosote and mesquite shrublands during winter and early spring, while tobosa grass and alkali sacaton ranges are used during summer (or during spring with adequate moisture). Although creosote bush and mesquite dominated shrublands may have little perennial grass understory, they sometimes contain nutritious plants such as 4-wing saltbush, winterfat, and cool-season annual forbs, which are preferred by livestock when perennial grasses are dormant.

Tobosa grass and alkali sacaton are comparatively less nutritious during dormancy, and more efficiently eaten by livestock when they are actively growing during summer. Pastures dominated by Lehmann lovegrass, a warm-season grass introduced from South Africa that stays green nearly year-round, can also be used in this system to relieve grazing pressure on native perennial grasses.

Seasonal suitability has also been used on mountain ranges in the northwestern U.S. where grassland, forest, and meadow vegetation types provide late spring/early summer use, late summer/early fall use, and fall grazing, respectively. In Utah, seasonal suitability has been practiced where desert (winter use), foothill (spring use), and mountain ranges (summer use) are managed as separate, seasonal grazing units.

Seeded introduced grasses may be important components of other seasonal suitability systems because of their ability to provide forage both earlier and later than native range. For example, rotating livestock through native range in summer, crested wheatgrass pastures in spring, and Russian wildrye pastures in the fall more than doubled grazing capacity in Alberta.

Best Pasture

Because summer rainfall in the southwestern U.S. usually comes in the form of intense but isolated thunderstorms, summer moisture patterns are typically spotty and unpredictable. It is not uncommon for areas of a ranch separated by only a few miles to vary greatly in the amount of precipitation received from a storm event. The best pasture grazing system, as originally proposed by Valentine (1967), attempts to match cattle movements with irregular precipitation patterns and associated forage production without regard to a rigid rotation schedule. For instance, when a local rain event causes a flush of annual forbs in a particular pasture, cattle are moved to that pasture, and then moved back to the previous pasture once acceptable utilization levels of the ephemeral forb resource have been achieved.

On the other hand, if a pasture that is tentatively scheduled for grazing continues to miss localized rainstorms while another pasture continues to receive moisture, the rotation schedule for the two pastures could be flip-flopped. Because livestock movements are not rigidly timed to a particular timetable, the best pasture

system requires that land managers command a mindset of high flexibility.

The best pasture system may also be timed to match seasonal forage quality changes across ecological sites, and thus, embraces some elements of the seasonal suitability system. For example, pastures containing black grama as the primary forage species may be deferred until the dormant season when it is higher in protein compared to pastures dominated by blue grama or hairy grama. Because black grama is relatively less resistant to grazing than many other perennial grasses, winter grazing has less impact on this species than use during the growing season. This approach works best when some of the pastures in the “rotation” contain winter annuals and palatable shrubs.

As with the seasonal suitability grazing system, the best pasture system may involve turning on or off watering points as needed to rotate cattle through pastures. Cattle learned within a year to follow active watering points on a 3,160-acre ranch in southeastern Arizona (Martin and Ward 1970). Because localized heavy grazing around watering points was controlled during Martin and Ward’s 8-year study, perennial grass forage production nearly doubled with the best pasture system compared to continuous grazing.

Short Duration

Short duration grazing differs from other specialized systems in that a grazing area is typically divided into several small pastures (also called paddocks or cells), each of which may receive *more than one period* of nonuse *and* grazing during a single growing season. The number of nonuse and grazing periods depends on seasonal plant growth rates (fast/slow), and amount of forage produced within and across pastures.

Short duration grazing commonly uses five to 12 pasture units in which there are grazing periods lasting from 3 to 14 days. Pasture moves are made more frequently during periods of rapid growth and less frequently during periods of slower growth. A grazing period is followed by a variable nongrazing period of up to 60 days to allow for forage regrowth. The actual duration of each pasture’s nongrazing period depends on growing conditions and the size, number, and productivity of paddocks available.

Proponents of short duration grazing maintain this system benefits rangeland resources and domestic livestock production in several ways when properly implemented, including: improved soil water infiltration and increased mineral cycling due to animal impact (e.g., “hoof action”), increased photosynthesis that provides longer periods of available leafy forage to livestock, improved animal distribution and plant utilization, reduced percentage of ungrazed “wolf” plants, lower labor costs, better individual animal performance, and improved rangeland condition. The most attractive contention of short duration grazing to livestock producers

is that higher stocking rates and stock densities can be used because of the “shorter duration” of grazing and more intensive management.

Rangeland research indicates that managers should carefully consider several factors before investing in a short duration grazing system, particularly in arid regions (see Holechek et al., 1998, 2000, for recent reviews of short duration grazing research). Arid areas typically have short growing seasons (less than 60 days) due to low precipitation levels, cold weather, or both; this minimizes the positive aspects of repeated periods of heavy defoliation followed by nonuse, especially when inadequate growing conditions (e.g., drought) limits regrowth potential of heavily grazed plants.

Concentrating a large number of animals in smaller pastures that have recently received high intensity storms can cause soil compaction and decrease infiltration rates. Increased trail density around water has been problematic in pastures that have been partitioned around a central watering point. Short duration grazing usually calls for extra labor for herding and large amounts of fencing to partition a large grazing area into smaller grazing areas because it is more costly to fence arid rangelands (less forage/unit area = more fence needed) than more productive areas (more forage/unit area = less fence needed).

Frequent pasture rotations can take a toll on animal production, and care must be taken to prevent mother-dam separations during livestock movements. Finally, there is simply less room for error in arid regions to decide when animals should be moved or destocked; failure to move animals at the correct time or to destock during drought can cause long-term damage to desert grasses.

Holechek et al. (1998) asserted that short duration grazing works best on flat, humid areas that have extended growing seasons (at least 3 months), greater than 20 inches of average annual precipitation, and an average annual forage production of greater than 2,000 pounds/acre. However, these authors identified two cases where short duration grazing might be successfully used in arid areas: (1) in flat, low-lying areas with deep, productive soils that collect water runoff from less productive upland areas, and (2) on exotic grass seedings (e.g., Lehmann lovegrass, crested wheatgrass) where grazing resistance and capacity may be higher than native rangeland.

Some Final Thoughts on Grazing Systems

- An infinite combination of climates, soils, topography, and vegetation types occur across the western U.S. and Canada, which makes choosing the “correct” grazing system a challenge. No grazing system will work everywhere, or, as William Krueger from Oregon State University puts it, “every grazing system will fail somewhere.” The system you choose must be tailor-made to your unique situation (Table 1).

- Implementing a grazing system does not eliminate the need to heed basic principles of grazing management (stocking rates, season of use, frequency of use, kind or mix of animals, animal selectivity, etc.).
- Grazing systems require greater, rather than less management input, compared to continuous or season-long grazing. Increased attention to range and livestock *management* (see next point) may often be a primary reason for the success of a particular grazing system.
- Animal distribution tools such as herding, proper placement of nutrient blocks, selective culling based on animal behavior characteristics, range improvements (burning, reseeding, water developments), and control of access to watering locations should be implemented in ways that complement the intended management objectives of grazing systems.
- Flexibility is the hallmark of successful range management in arid regions. Strict adherence to animal numbers and livestock movement dates without regard to vagaries in forage production can be counterproductive to both rangeland and livestock production. Adjust stocking rates and movement dates so that livestock numbers are in balance with forage supply.
- Rangeland monitoring is critical to document both successes and failures of grazing systems and other management activities. Rangelands are extremely variable in the kind and amount of vegetation they are capable of producing. This variability is apparent across the land (space) and across the years (time) as anyone who has spent time on a ranch knows. Monitoring techniques are available to help you determine how much variability in precipitation and forage production cattle producers can expect on their ranch across both space and time. Monitoring data are really the “proof of the pudding” as to whether a grazing system and management practices are accomplishing a cattle producer’s goals and objectives.
- Evaluate a new grazing system over a period of 6 to 12 years so that several weather cycles can be evaluated. This prevents erroneously assigning success or failure to a new grazing system when abnormally high or low precipitation years may be the primary cause.

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