USING PROPER GRAZING TECHNIQUES CAN BENEFIT BOTH WILDLIFE AND LIVESTOCK

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Wyoming's grazing lands are incredibly important wildlife habitat. There are 27.5 million acres of grazed rangeland in Wyoming. Grazing systems are designed to be beneficial for livestock, and if designed properly, they can also benefit wildlife that are present or that are desired to be present. In general, poor grazing management negatively affects wildlife, plants, and soil, as well as livestock weight gains and production. Good grazing management provides a sustainable system that promotes optimal growth and care of the forage resource.

Grazing animals are typically put into two foraging groups; either grazers or browsers. Grazers are primarily grass eaters and include bison and cattle. Browsers depend more on forbs (non-woody herbaceous flowering plants other than grasses) and shrubs (woody plants). This group includes moose, mule deer, whitetail deer, and pronghorn. Some animals, such as elk and domestic sheep, graze as much as they browse.

There are three types of cover that wildlife may require: hiding cover, thermal cover, and cover for raising young. Hiding cover provides visual physical and/or scent protection from predators. Thermal cover allows animals to stay cool in the shade, keep out of the wind, or may hold warm air in. Greater cover may be required when wildlife are raising their young, because the immature members of the species are easily preyed upon.

It is beneficial for plant growth to allow full plant development before grazing. If plants are grazed before full development, they should be allowed to recover; therefore grazing should be stopped before the end of the growing season. As a general rule of thumb, important forage plants should have less than half of their leaf area removed. The proportion of leaf area removed should be even less and recovery (rest) periods lengthened in areas needing improvement.

Different wildlife species may benefit from different grazing management techniques. Some species benefit from tall, dense grass cover, while others are found in heavily grazed patches. Many wildlife species benefit from shrub and/or tree cover. When designing a grazing system for a specific species of wildlife, the year-round habitat requirements of the species must be known. Managing for one species may benefit, adversely impact, or have neutral effects on habitat for other wildlife.

Because of the current interest in sage grouse, some managers are designing grazing systems to specifically benefit sage grouse. Sage grouse require sagebrush year-round for forage and cover. Hens use grass as hiding cover around their nests in early spring. A grazing system that allows for tall grass cover left over from the previous growing year increases the amount of cover around nests early in the season before green-up. Deferring grazing in pastures where sage grouse are known to nest until after nesting provides greater cover from nest predators. In areas where nesting habitat occurs in all available pastures, a grazing system that rotates pastures used in the spring is beneficial.

Hens and chicks eat forbs and insects in the spring and summer. Extra grass and forb cover may provide hiding cover for defenseless chicks. This extra cover also provides a microclimate that harbors the high protein insects the chicks

Proper grazing management allows for maximum growth of grass forbs and shrubs.

need. Light cattle grazing or no grazing during this time period could be beneficial for grouse. Since sheep eat a lot of forbs, they may compete with sage grouse for food. Therefore, if grazing is necessary in chick raising areas, light grazing by cattle in chick-raising areas may be better for sage grouse than grazing by sheep. Any grazing system that provides a healthy mixture of perennial grass, forb, and sagebrush cover should benefit sage grouse.

Grazing management that provides a sustainable, diverse, and vigorous mixture of native vegetation is compatible with good wildlife habitat. Grazing systems can be designed to enhance native vegetation that benefits both wildlife and livestock. Systems can also be set up to benefit one specific species of concern. For more information on grazing management contact your local Game and Fish habitat biologist, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service office, or your local county extension agent.

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