DEALING WITH A MOB MENTALITY – PART III

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In the last couple of months, the forage articles have focused on a grazing method called "mob grazing" or, more aptly, "ultra-high stock density grazing" (UHSD). In general, UHSD grazing is the practice of grazing large herds in a very small area for a very short time (e.g., 200 cow-calf pairs on one acre for 8 hours). The concepts of UHSD grazing have been hyped in several farm magazines and books, and it has grown popular in Georgia and throughout much of the Eastern U.S. In previous articles, I have been rather blunt in my criticism of UHSD and how some "nuggets of truth" have been spun into false beliefs. But like a true academician, in this month's article I will change my tune. Sort of.

Doth mine eyes deceive me?

"Have you actually seen it?" is the most common question in the chorus of emails and conversations that I've had with folks who have taken exception to my last two articles. The answer is, yes, I have seen a number of farms doing this. I must say that the lush, dark green regrowth that occurs following an UHSD grazing is quite impressive. It is especially impressive when one is used to the pale green, overgrazed pastures on farms practicing continuous grazing (i.e., no rotational grazing).

There is no denying the improvement in the rate and appearance of the regrowth after a mob has finished grazing at an UHSD. Arguably, the most important reason for this increase in vigor and color is that the plants were allowed a long rest period prior to grazing. This is the foundational principle of UHSD grazing.

Long rest periods are good for the plant for a number of reasons. First, it allows the root system of the plant to become fully developed (Figure 1). This is critically important to the productivity of the plant, especially under drought and heat stress.

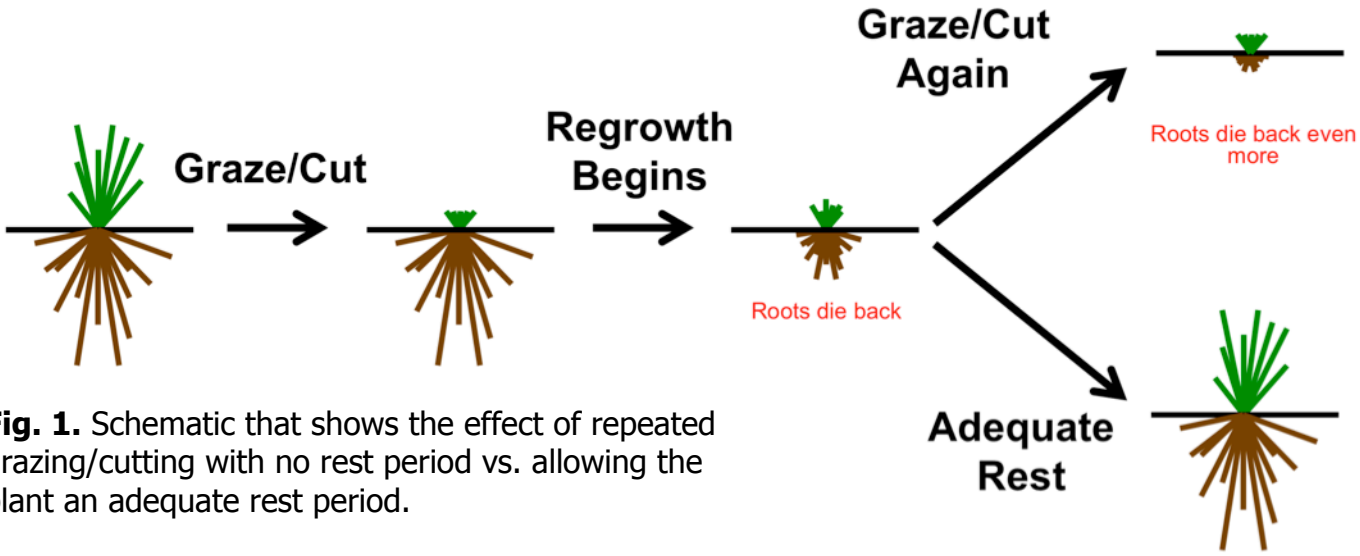

Fig. 1. Schematic that shows the effect of repeated grazing/cutting with no rest period vs. allowing the plant an adequate rest period.

Second, long rest periods allow the plant to build up a reserve of carbohydrates and protein in the lower stems, rhizomes, stolons, and/or roots of the plant. If rest periods are long enough to allow the plant to fully mature or even go dormant, many of the mobile nutrients (e.g., N, P, K, etc.) will be remobilized and stored in those same storage organs. This storage makes it easier for the plant to regrow, since it is not as

reliant on the photosynthate/sugars produced from the first few leaves (i.e., it already has an abundance of stored carbs) and does not have to immediately expend energy to absorb nutrients from the soil (i.e., it already has a stockpile of major nutrients).

It is here that all those who manage pasture and forage can learn a little something from the proponents of UHSD grazing. That is, allowing the plant an adequate rest period is CRITICAL to its productivity and, ultimately, its longevity.

Note, however, that ***adequate*** and ***long*** are not synonymous. Perhaps a good way to think of this is that a normal lunch is ***adequate***, but that is different from the lunch one would eat at Thanksgiving. One might do alright for a little while eating one large Thanksgiving dinner everyday, but eating "three-squares" each day will likely work out better in the long run.

Allowing ***adequate*** rest is a foundational principle of rotational grazing (or, as I like to call it, "rational" grazing). Maintaining a cycle of grazing followed by ***adequate*** rest in a well-designed rational grazing system will allow benefits to the plant that are similar to those seen in UHSD grazing systems. Rationally grazed pastures will also regrow quicker and look lush.

Weeds-B-Gone

Another benefit touted by proponents of UHSD grazing is that weeds become increasingly less problematic where pastures have been regularly mob grazed. Again, this is true and it is very apparent when one sees "before" and "after" pictures from pastures that had been previously continuously stocked (i.e., given little or no rest between grazings). One reason for the dramatic change in weed pressure in pastures that are taken from severely overgrazed (continuous stocking) to a situation where they are undergrazed (UHSD) is that the competitive environment has changed (Figure 2).

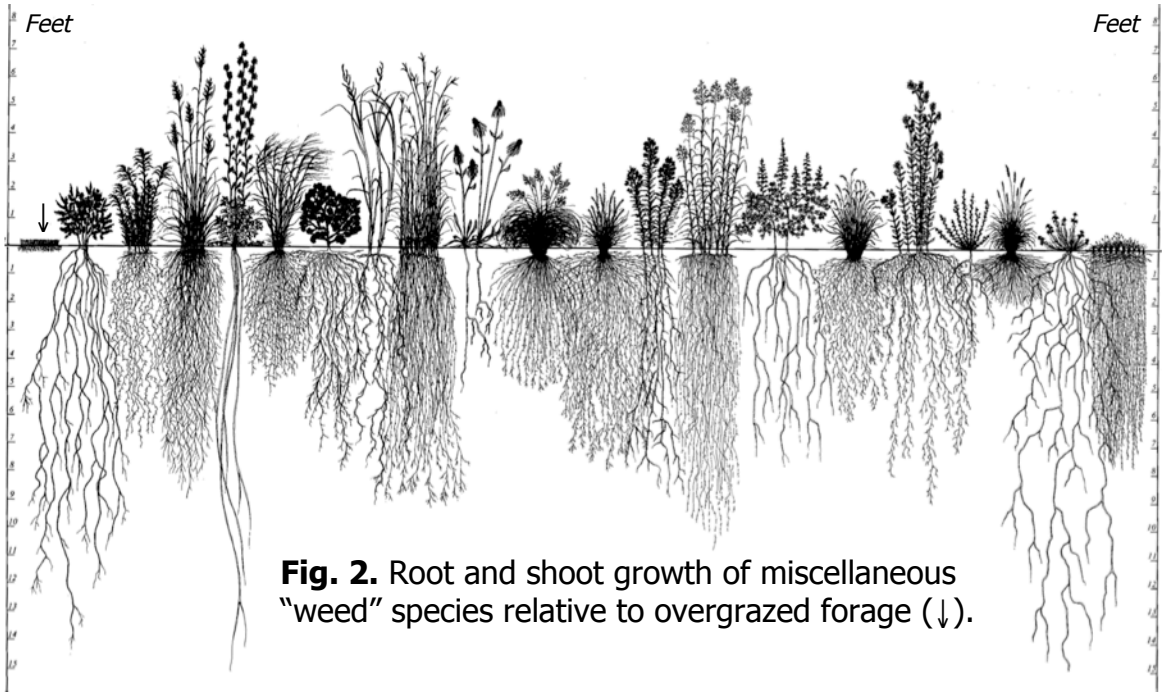

Fig. 2. Root and shoot growth of miscellaneous "weed" species relative to overgrazed forage (↓).

A stand of overgrazed grass quickly becomes shaded by its tall neighbors, and water and nutrients will be stolen right from underneath its root zone. When that same stand is given long rest periods, it is better able to compete with the weeds because it grows more vigorously after being grazed and has a deeper root system.

Again, this is a lesson that the proponents of UHSD grazing can teach to all those who manage pasture and forage. Allowing adequate rest will greatly improve weed control in one's pastures. But, this concept is also not new. Producers who practice rotational/rational grazing have also seen these same benefits. In fact, under good rational grazing practices, many of these weeds are more quickly controlled because they are actually palatable when young and are grazed by the animals. In an UHSD grazing system, those same weeds may become too mature or unpalatable, and they may end up being only trampled or left standing. Moreover, a potential risk to mob grazing areas that are heavily infested with some weeds can prove catastrophic, as some weeds become extremely toxic when mature. These same toxic weeds may be in other pastures, but under more conventional grazing methods, the cattle may avoid eating them.

Never say Never

As a final word on this subject, I would like to point out that no one is saying that UHSD grazing or allowing ***long*** rest periods should never be done. It certainly is a good idea to occasionally allow a pasture to have a long rest period (more than ~60 days). In fact, as was pointed out in the first of these articles, these principles have been a standard practice for millennia, and it remains one that is recommended in a number of situations still today. A common example of allowing a long rest period is the oft-recommended practice of stockpiling tall fescue or bermudagrass. This is an excellent management strategy to reduce the amount of hay one feeds, and it can also improve the persistence and vigor of the stand if it is managed correctly. Another example is that it often is good to allow tall fescue to have a long rest period in early summer (late June – late August).

My objection to the UHSD grazing blitzkrieg in the media is that it is being promoted as superior to all other grazing management systems. No grazing system is universally superior to all the others. There are all sorts of economic, environmental, and practical production issues that need to be considered when optimizing the forage system for a given farm and situation. A strategy like UHSD grazing may be better than some continuous grazing systems, and a reasonable option in some specific situations (e.g., rented land, land preparation, etc.). But, one would have a difficult time justifying it over most other rational grazing systems as being the best system for most cattle operations in the Eastern U.S.

More information

You can access all three of the "Dealing with a Mob Mentality" articles by visiting our website at www.georgiaforages.com. If you have additional forage management questions, visit our website or contact your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office by dialing 1-800-ASK-UGA1.