South Dakota
Soil Health Coalition

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Improving Grass Production & Protecting Native Species With Mob Grazing
S.D. Rancher Shares His Success Story

By Kara Pugsley for the SD Soil Health Coalition

Grazing to maintain the health of native grasses is an important strategy for ranchers in South Dakota, and for Charlie Totton, learning how to manage his grasslands has been a key tool which has allowed him to improve the health of his soil and operation as a whole. Totton ranches in Brule County with his wife Tanya. Their seed stock/cow calf operation is located 8 miles north of Chamberlain, SD. They've been ranching there since the fall of 1997.

With their ranch located just 3 miles west of the Missouri river – they have a total of 4,000 acres of land with variations between flat and steep areas. Totton has figured out how to use each type of land to his advantage. "Some of that poor land was a long way away from water, so we moved it into dormant season grazing - when cows don't need as much water in the cooler part of the year. We use the rough land for dormant grazing and the best land we utilize during the growing season. That does two things for us: we can get the most cows in the fewest acres, and vice versa, the most acres grow uninterrupted during the heart of the growing season."

Several years ago, Totton attended the South Dakota Grazing School, a workshop hosted by the SD Grassland Coalition. He has also hosted the workshop at his ranch. "Since I went to the grazing school, I went to much more intense grazing on our ranch," he explains.

Mob Grazing: Allowing for Uninterrupted Growth of Grasslands

Totton practices mob grazing on his ranch of 4,000 acres, a practice where he concentrates grazing during June, July and August on just 400 of his total acres. "That's only 10% of our ranch, but during this time period it benefits the whole ranch by keeping the cows off of the majority of acres during the growing season. By bunching them up like that, we have a lot of grass that's not getting interrupted – it's growing at its highest potential."

His definition of the term mob grazing is "if you move your cows at least once a day or more and you're taking 75% of the forage off the land."

Totton does go out and move the fence every day, but he says it's well worth the extra labor. "We have a lot more winter grazing because we use fewer acres in the summer time. I don't have to put up as much hay."

Totton's main priority has always been to protect the native species of grasses. "The reason we're trying to protect the warm season species is that they are what get grazed out with season-long grazing," he explains. "Your more productive warm season grasses will get shorter and shorter if you don't manage them properly."

He rotates the cows through the pastures every 5 days in April and May to hold back the brome and blue grass. "If you hold back the cool season grasses, you have more moisture and nutrients for your warm season grasses."

He mob grazes 400-acre segments and alternates where he is grazing every other year. "That way our plants get to rest one year and shoot seed heads, then we take them off, grazing the ground the next year."

Totton's method works well for him, and he typically has 200 cows grazing 10 months out of the year. "No one else I know in my area grazes 10 months a year," he said. "People have gotten to where they think they have to feed cows in the wintertime, and it's just a habit. I believe it isn't necessary."

"Before we started mob grazing, we'd put cows in the pasture for the whole summer, and what we found was the plants they grazed off first would try to regrow, and your little regrowth is like your ice cream. So, the cows would come back and re-graze the same spot rather than grazing the whole big pasture, to get the nutritious little regrowth or the ice-cream. "

Better Grass Production, Water Infiltration and Wildlife

Totton noticed differences in his grass production after he transitioned to mob grazing. "The experts will tell you that as far as mob grazing, you really want to eat or trample the majority of the plant to the ground to see if your nutrient cycle is efficiently working," he explains. "If you trample it to the ground - your microorganisms are recycling it. Whereas if you leave it standing it oxidizes, and you're letting carbon back in the air instead of sequestering the carbon into the soil."

Water infiltration was another big improvement for Totton's soil. "There's been a tremendous difference in infiltration year-round," he explains. Managing the grass is the main way Charlie and Tanya have improved the water infiltration of their land compared to others in their area. Totton sees the difference every spring. "Typically, my neighbor's dam is run over with water while mine will be low in the spring."

He's also been able to cut back on chemicals as the mob grazing has helped control undesirable plants and weeds. He is able to do spot spraying now versus blanket spraying. "The problem with spraying pastures is you end up killing good plants along with the bad plants."

Since implementing mob grazing, Totton notes he's seen an increase in wildlife, specifically more deer, pheasants and other birds. Having a good grazing rotation has helped him create a good habitat for wildlife. "If you want a good place to hunt, you have to have healthy grass – and the only way to accomplish that is to manage your grasslands."

Bottom line, Totton says mob grazing has helped him work with nature and not against it. Proper grassland management is key to the overall soil health of any grazing operation and can provide for healthier cattle, increase infiltration and wildlife habitat, as well as production and protection of native grass species.

Choosing to Manage Your Grasslands

In his experience, people always find excuses not to manage their land. Many of the excuses he's heard are comments like, "the land is too rough," or it's "too far from water."

"Every place is manageable if you just put enough thought into it," says Totton. "If you look at how rough my place is - we use the rough land for dormant grazing."

Talk to your local NRCS personnel, he encourages, "That's what I started with, was talking to them." To find out more or to attend the South Dakota Soil Health School or South Dakota Grazing School visit www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org or www.sdgrass.org. A "Profiles In Soil Health" video featuring Charlie Totton can also be found at www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/videos/ .

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Image Courtesy of USDA-NRCS South Dakota

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