

# LivestockLinks

A Statewide Newsletter for Alabamians

Summer 2011

## Mob Grazing: A Fad or a Practical Grazing Method for the Southeast?

Ilana Stover, Regional Extension Agent,  
Animal Science & Forages

This edition of LivestockLinks covers topics related to forage as it pertains to raising livestock. Beef producers often overlook the most important part of their production practices — forages and pasture management. As the cost of living increases, so do the inputs into farming operations. When it comes to the cost of seed, fertilizer, herbicides, hay (whether you are buying or producing), and other supplemental feed, the profit margins are getting slim, even with the recent increase in cattle prices.

As the land-grant university in the state, Auburn University strives to provide sound scientific methods for livestock production that are not just good in theory but also in practice. One such method that the Upper Coastal Plain Agricultural Research Center is implementing is mob grazing. This method of managing cattle is not a new concept but is one that has recently gained popularity and some might say has become the latest fad. As with all management practices, it has its pros and cons and may not be suitable for every cattle operation.



Mob grazing involves putting a large number of animals on a small lot of land and moving the cattle two or three times a day and sometimes more. With mob grazing, the goal is for the cows to consume less than 60 percent of the available forage and then trample the rest. Reportedly, there are ten major benefits to mob grazing: improved forage quality, reduced hay and feed costs, elimination of seed purchases, increased legume and native grass growth, reduced weed problems, minimization of equipment costs, improved manure distribution, improved wildlife habitat, increased beef production per acre, and increased profits.

For the demonstration at the Upper Coastal Plain Agricultural Research Center, 60 cows of various ages will be put on 60 acres and will be moved through the 60 acres starting in late spring and continue until the land is deemed unable to sustain the cows in proper condition. The purpose of this demonstration is to put mob grazing into practice to see how well the forage and the cows perform. Soil samples will be taken at the outset, and the soil will be fertilized accordingly. The equipment that will be used includes a solar-charged electric fence, portable electric fence stakes and a movable water trough. One person a day will be required to move the cattle to the next location.

One of the things to be determined from this study is whether the native grasses and legumes will regrow and whether there is a decrease in the number of weeds. No seed will be put out, allowing nature to take its course. How long the land is able to sustain the cattle and whether supplemental hay or any other feed are needed will also be determined. Soil samples will be taken throughout this demonstration to measure the soil quality and note whether there is any improvement. The presence of



and increase or decrease in beneficial insects in the soil will also be studied. The hope is that the litter, or trampled forage, will allow organic matter to build up, promoting beneficial microbes and insects in the soil and promoting soil aeration and proper water drainage as well.

Another reported benefit of mob grazing is improved manure distribution. The thinking behind this is that the cows will not be as likely to congregate under a tree or around a stationary watering trough but will graze in the entire area so that the manure will cover a larger space. As the cows walk around the area, they will not only distribute the manure piles, but will also be walking through piles and working them into the ground through simple hoof action.

Finally, and most importantly, we will be interested to see whether this method truly produces increased beef production per acre and increased profits, particularly in savings through a decrease in input costs.

Field day dates will be posted for those who are interested in coming to see the demonstration. Progress updates will be posted, as will the final outcomes of the project. As always, you are more than welcome to stop by the Upper Coastal Plain Agricultural Research Center located in Winfield, Ala., to see the ongoing projects.

## Just Thinking

**Jack Tatum**, Regional Extension Agent, Animal Science & Forages

During the past couple of months, I have attended several cattle meetings, and repeatedly been asked, "How high are cattle going, and will these prices hold through late summer?" The question I have to ask beef producers is, "Do you have enough hay to get through the winter?" One producer opened my eyes with the statement he made in response. He said he had been pushing his figuring pencil lately and discovered it was going to cost him between \$100 and \$125 a day just to put diesel in his tractor to cut hay.

On my way home, I began to think about some of the forage meetings I have attended and what we can do to cut our production expenses.

Here are a few of my ideas.

1) Soil test, then lime, then fertilize.

How much money can a \$7 soil test save? Plenty! Do not buy what you do not need. If you cannot fertilize, then lime and do a soil test every two years. The priority is to not let your pastures or hayfields get in bad shape.

2) We are forage producers, so make forages work on your farm.

Plant the forages at the right time, use the recommended varieties and do not overgraze. Study the forage research data that Auburn University has published. Be a leader in forage production in your county.

3) Watch for pests.

How many acres of hay were lost last year due to armyworms? In fact, how much grazing in pastures was lost to armyworms? When you plant the winter annuals, watch for cricket and grasshopper problems.

4) Plant legumes.

Depending on legume species and environmental conditions during the growth season, legumes can produce anywhere from 20 to 300 pounds per acre. The majority of nitrogen is found in leaves and stems, and this fixed nitrogen is primarily available as protein and is consumed by the animal. Can you beat that deal?

5) Reduce your stored feed needs.

Are you glad when you put out that last bale of hay? Can we produce enough forage to reduce our hay requirements by 30 to 60 days? Is your hay stored inside or covered with a tarp? Can you buy high-quality hay cheaper than you can produce it?

6) Control your situation.

What you produce on your farm is up to you. How do your pastures or hayfields look and produce? It is sometimes best to park that truck and walk your hayfields or pastures. Get a close-up view of your forage situation. Remember, it's your money or profit that you are spending or saving. You are the boss of your farm.

7) Check prices.

Prices of fertilizer, seeds, lime, pesticides, and so forth differ from store to store. Check prices to see if stores will offer you a good deal if you buy in volume. It is good to have a good relationship with the store manager where you buy your products.

## Controlling Fire Ants in Livestock Operations

**Anthony Wiggins**, Regional Extension Agent, Animal Science & Forages

Over the last few years, I've gotten more and more questions from livestock producers about controlling fire ants in their pastures and hayfields. Some producers want to control fire ants because the mounds interfere with hay cutting and cause wear

and tear to the equipment; others want to control them to get rid of the unsightly mounds in their pastures. Whatever the reason for wanting to control fire ants, the good news is that producers do have options.

A lot of fire ant research has occurred over the past 15 years and a lot has been learned about the biology and life cycle of the creatures. Having this understanding has allowed researchers to develop control products that when used correctly do an outstanding job of managing fire ants. Notice I said manage and not eliminate. When it comes to fire ant control, the current goal is to manage populations to a level that we can live with, not to totally eliminate fire ants.

Baits are one of the fire ant control products that have hit the market over the last few years and are probably the best suited for livestock producers in their endeavor to control fire ants in pastures and hayfields. There are a number of baits to choose from, and the baits contain different active ingredients that work at varying rates and by different modes of action but ultimately all do the same thing — control fire ants.

The reasons baits are the right choice for livestock operations is their ease of use and their cost as compared to other products. As opposed to treating individual mounds, which can be very labor intensive, expensive and impractical in many situations, baits can simply be broadcast across the pasture and hayfield and the ants will pick up the bait thinking that it is food. Because fire ants think it is food, baits should be applied at a time when ants are out foraging for food. The fire ants take the bait back to the mound where it gets distributed to the rest of the colony and begins to do its job. In this situation, the fire ants do most of the work.

Baits typically cost anywhere from \$10 to \$20 per acre to apply, depending on the product and application rate. This may sound high, but when compared to individual mound treatments that may cost hundreds of dollars per acre not counting labor, this is cheap. Granted, if large amounts of acreage have to be treated, the cost may not be feasible. That's when a producer has to determine which areas are critical and can be justified and included in the budget. These areas may be hayfields, calving pastures or fields that can be seen from the road if aesthetics is the purpose for controlling fire ants.

For most bait, the application rate is 1.5 pounds per acre (read the label for individual product application rates). If you think about it, 1.5 pounds per acre is not much material to evenly spread across an acre. A spreader must be calibrated correctly to apply such a small amount and needs an agitation system that allows the bait to flow properly and not clog. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System has several spreaders designed for application of fire ant baits located in several counties across the state for people to use. These spreaders have a variety of mounting brackets that allow the spreaders to be attached to different pieces of equipment. I would suggest using one of these spreaders if you decide to apply bait.

I have just skimmed the surface when it comes to using baits to control fire ants in livestock operations. There is much more that a person needs to know regarding timing of application, strategies for control, further cost-saving considerations and expectations for control, but the key thing to remember is that

we can manage fire ants to a level that we can live with. For more information about controlling fire ants in livestock operations or how to obtain one of the bait spreaders, call your local Extension agent or visit our website at [www.aces.edu/dept/fireants/](http://www.aces.edu/dept/fireants/).

## What Do I Need to Know About Fall Armyworms?

**Ken Kelly**, Regional Extension Agent, Animal Science & Forages

If you are trying to produce forage or hay, armyworms can be tough to deal with, and some armyworm years are worse than others. There are a lot of variables that we just don't know until the season gets here. Will they be early this year? Will they be bad this year? We just don't know. The long-term forecast is for neutral conditions — no drier or hotter than average, so I don't think they will be so bad this year.

A lot of the variability of the armyworm season can be directly correlated to the life cycle of the worm itself. Moths fly in and lay eggs, the eggs hatch and the larvae (armyworm) eats and then pupates, and then the cycle is repeated. So what does that have to do with how bad the armyworm season is? Well, the beginning of the season is determined by when the armyworm adults (moths) fly north from south Florida, the Caribbean or south Texas. Armyworms can tolerate virtually no cold weather and thrive in seasons of drought, so if the weather is cool late and wet throughout spring and summer, the armyworm occurrence tends to be later and less severe. However, if it is warm early followed by drought, then we could have one of those armyworm years. Usually, we are somewhere in the middle. One thing for certain, however, is that there will be armyworm problems somewhere in Alabama at some point this year.

So what do we do? First, we scout our pastures. Scouting pastures and hayfields is the only way to detect armyworms before they cause economic damage. One easy thing to watch for is the presence of flocks of birds, in particular, cattle egrets in pastures and hayfields. However, you can't depend on that as your sole scouting regimen. You need to regularly get out there and look for the worms themselves. The key to controlling the worms is to find them when they are very small, and this isn't always the easiest thing to do. It's fairly easy to spot an armyworm when it is 2 inches long, there is one on every blade of grass, and you can hear them eating your hay crop. The problem is that at this point you have already lost the battle. Bigger worms are harder to kill and have already done their damage. The key to controlling armyworms (and saving your hay crop) is finding them when they are small. One tool that is available to producers is sweep nets, which are available in just about every county thanks to funds from the Alabama Cattlemen's Association. They are easy to use, provided you can walk through a pasture and swing the net from side to side through the grass in front of you. The nets allow producers to find worms when they are very small, thereby allowing the use of minimal rates of insecticide to get good control of the armyworm problems. This helps not only the environment, but also your pocketbook! If you feel like you need more instruction on how to scout for armyworms with sweep nets than what was just



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
STATE HEADQUARTERS—735 EXTENSION LOOP  
AUBURN UNIVERSITY, ALABAMA 36849-5632  
OFFICIAL BUSINESS

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
PERMIT #530  
Montgomery, AL

Published by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University), an equal opportunity educator and employer.

© 2011 by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. All rights reserved.

given, have no fear! There is a YouTube video available at [www.youtube.com/acescounties/](http://www.youtube.com/acescounties/) to show you exactly what to do.

Now, what do we do when we have an armyworm issue? The first option would be to simply cut the forage (if it is large enough) and bale it. However, a lot of the time it's not ready, so you need to look for an insecticide option. You can search through the ACES Integrated Pest Management (IPM) guide to find what is labeled in Alabama for use on forages or hay to control armyworms. Remember, always use the current ACES IPM guide! What is labeled and legal varies from state to state and year to year. When spraying, always try to spray either early or late in the day (when the worms are most active) and use a minimum of 30 to 40 gallons of water per acre (ground application).

The conclusion to the story is that many producers this year will have to deal with armyworms. If you are vigilant with your scouting and use properly applied insecticides combined with proper cultural practices, you can avoid armyworm disasters. If you don't, you can lose a crop. If you need assistance identifying armyworms or deciding on control tactics, contact your county Extension office for help.