



Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

Volume 6 No.4 Fall 2002
Editor: Laurie Ball-Gisch

Intensive Grazing: Experiences and tips from our resident experts



Susan Mongold wrote:

When I was figuring out intensive grazing for the cattle that we used to raise, we would figure a cow and her calf as a unit during the growing season. If you want to stock pile grass so as to graze into the fall winter and spring then you need enough so that you have extra grass at the end of the season and plan for this.

So it would be the same for sheep. The rule of thumb is that you can graze 5 to 7 sheep and their lambs on the same amount of pasture that it takes to support one cow. Using intensive grazing you can get far more from your grass in a normal rainfall year.

With the cows we were using 1 to 3 breaks a day and grazing them at an intensity of 24 to 56 cows per acre!!! If you figure out the sheep equivalent using 6 sheep and their lambs that would be 144 to 336 sheep and their lambs per acre. At that rate the sheep are not fussy eaters but gobble every blade of grass and weeds. In the spring the cows were moved twice a day but later on when the calves started to eat we moved the herd 3 times a day. This was done because the calves would only eat for an hour and then lay down. The cows would continue to eat and when the calves would get up to eat again there would be only poor quality grass left. Moving the fence 3 times a day gave the calves three lush grass meals and higher gains. You can also do this by making a creep for the calves and let them graze the next break ahead so they always have access to fresh lush grass. The other reason for giving more breaks a day is to minimize bloat. With a large amount of cows or sheep on a very small amount of pasture no one sheep can get enough of the very lush clover or alfalfa to cause them to bloat. Moving the break several times a day gives them fresh feed and the highest nutrition possible while minimizing the risks.

Doing this we were getting 409 lbs of gain on each calf plus maybe 100 lbs or more gain on the cows for each acre. That is a gain of about 2 lbs of gain a day for each calf.

At these stocking rates your management has to be intensive too. Our pastures are irrigated so we can control the grass growth more easily. With pastures that are not irrigated you have to be aware of exactly how much grass you have at all times in reserve and how long it will take to grow more. Every 3 to 4 days each pasture was rated as to how high the grass growth was and the quality of that grass and then I could figure out just how many grazing days I had left for the herd. If the grass is getting ahead of you, then skip a pasture and hay that one and jump the sheep up to one that is in the perfect grazing stage of about 6 inches of leaf. This happens in the spring. The excess grass is used for hay by most graziers.

When you intensive graze at this rate the animals eat everything and it looks like a mowed golf course. The grass that grows back is all leaf and no stem. The grazed area has at least 30 days to regrow and sometimes it needs 60 days to regrow. However drought, heat and cooler days all affect the grasses growth and has to be figured in. This is where taking a grass inventory helps. I believe that I figured that in inch of leaf (don't count the stems is about 1000 lbs of feed). If your grass is slowing in growth and your next pasture is not quite ready you start slowing them down by keeping them in a break a bit extra longer.

Since every pasture and region is different you will have to get the stocking rate for the average pasture in your area and use this to do your initial figuring. You will get better with practice.

In most average rainfall areas it takes about 2 to 2 1/2 acres to support a cow and her calf for a year. So that means that that same pasture will support say 6 sheep and their lambs for a year. Intensive grazing can allow you to increase the stocking rate, sometimes double. We ran almost 200 cows on about 100 irrigated acres but only for the growing season from mid April through September. The cows were taken off the farm in October.

Barbara Webb wrote:

To weigh in on sheep/acre, specifically regarding weeds - it is my experience that by grossly overstocking a weedy pasture, the sheep will be forced to eat the weeds, which they may or may not do otherwise, even the less palatable weeds. Thankfully, Icelandics love to eat just about anything, but by making smaller paddocks in the beginning, a.) weeds are heavily chewed down which most cannot tolerate for long, and b.) if the green stuff is chewed right down, all that sunlight reaching the soil will encourage the pasture plants to fill in. I have had very good results letting them graze the clumping grasses right down, as native white clover then fills in beautifully in the empty spaces, no seeding required.

A good model is the huge herds of Bison that would range the west. Huge numbers of animals traveling together, their stocking rate per acre would be very high. Important though is an adequate resting period. I would worry about the rest time more than the stocking rate. Also, if overstocking, keep the time in the field very short. Then they can't actually eat down to the dirt, which can stunt the plants and damage their teeth. I have also read that by grazing closely to the ground, parasite eggs are subjected to sunlight, which can kill some/most of them.

I run about 250 sheep, adults and lambs, on about 25 acres of pasture, maybe 28. I also move them either daily, or at most, every 2 or 3 days. The pastures have been improving steadily since we came, both in density and in desirable plant species.

I've read that it is better to keep up an aggressive rotation schedule, even if it means occasionally removing them from the fields onto dry lot hay for a few days to fill in gaps between fields. A few days of hay in the grand scheme is much less costly, both monetarily and in terms of the pasture conditions, than rotating into a field that is not ready. I find that the doldrums of August when it is likely that the pasture will run low, is also a good time to bring the ewes in for weaning anyway.

Susan Mongold wrote:

The tighter you run the sheep and the more often you change them the less selective they become. Same for cows. But as Barbara says the trick is to give the pasture adequate rest and NEVER come back on that grass until it has grown again to it's ideal state of 5 to 7 inches no matter whether it takes 3 weeks or 8 weeks or 2 years as in the prairie dryland. To graze before this point will stress the grass and cause your pasture to become damaged and much less productive or even die or winterkill. The other point to remember is to stay

on one break for no more than 3 days. One day or less is best. If the break is too big the sheep will, as Ann says eat the ice cream and leave the cardboard and you will be left with big clumps of grass and weeds that will grow too coarse and lignified for anything to eat them. At this point you can mow or grow this pasture for a hay field and get rid of it that way.

I have noticed however that our sheep will clean up this wolfy stuff in the early spring when the new grass is washy and they need some fiber to balance their digestion systems. Stuff that they wouldn't touch disappears in the spring.

In figuring the animal units a calf after being weaned is considered * a unit and as a yearling is * of a cow unit and remains this till she calves at which time she starts eating more and she and her calf is 1 cow unit. So a sheep would be 1/6th of this amount for figuring pasture usage.

These are rough ways to figure out pasture usage, as there are many variables including the weather, season, rainfall etc.

When you are just beginning to graze intensively, it is a good exercise to measure off a 10 foot square with stakes and string in a pasture when the forage is lush and green and about 5 to 7 inches high and hand clip all of the grass/ clover weeds on that plot. Don't include any stems or dried stuff, just the succulent forage. Dry this on a tarp till it is as dry as hay and then weigh it.

Then you can figure out how many 10' X10' squares there are in the field that you have, roughly. Multiply this number by the weight of the dried forage that you clipped and you will get a pretty good of how much pounds of forage per acre you are looking at when your pasture is 5 to 7 inches high.

My sheep eat 7 to 10 lbs of hay a day in the winter and they will eat about that equivalent of grass in the growing season. So if your 10' X 10' yielded a pound of dried grass then it will take about 10 of those 10' X10' patches to feed your sheep for one day. Measure this off and eyeball it. This way you can start to get a feel of how large to make your breaks.

The sheep will also tell you if the break is too small or when it is time to move to a new break. They will utilize the forage better and complain less if they are moved frequently to small just right sized breaks. Practice will tell you what that size is and the size will change from pasture to pasture and from season to season. If one pasture has scant vegetation then you will need a bigger break for them or move it faster.

In the spring and late fall the grass will be tender and will not stay in their digestive systems very long so they can eat more so the breaks need to be small to prevent trampling and moved very frequently, at least once a day. In summer the grass lignifies even if it is green and lush and takes more time to go through the digestive system which means that the sheep can stay in the breaks longer as they will not trample the grass as much and it will take less grass to fill them up. It is interesting and a real workout for your brain. The Holistic Resource Management workbook helps you learn to track these things on a worksheet that you can buy from them. We found it very helpful to put this all down so you can see it all visually. These sheets are invaluable for reference also and we are always going back to them as a reference.