

EAST CENTRAL UPDATE

Highlighting Beneficial Management Practices in East Central Saskatchewan

March 2005 Issue

Managing Pastures for Improved Productivity



Mark Johanson speaks to participants in a two-day Pheasant Hills grazing tour held in the summer of 2004.

Between running a mixed farming operation near Stockholm, working at a nearby mine, operating a feedlot, fabricating metalwork, and team-roping at rodeos on weekends, it's fair to say that Mark Johanson was plenty busy.

With so many irons in the fire, Johanson was being stretched to the limit, and he was not satisfied with the returns he was getting from his land. In fact, he was beginning to become concerned about the impact his operation was having on his land's productivity and health.

So Johanson decided it was time to pause, step back and take a hard look at his operation – and maybe change some of the practices he'd been using for years.

"It got to the point that we were just getting burnt out... We actually had to start thinking about what we were doing. We realized there's got to be a better way with our grazing, and a better way to make a living," says

Johanson, who has since stepped back from his feedlot operation and slowed his metal fabrication to concentrate on optimizing his land use.

Johanson began by examining the ways he had been using his fields and pastures, and the effect this was having on their condition and yield. He

decided that some changes would have to be made, with a focus on improving the productivity of his land.

For Johanson, that meant learning to embrace some new methods and ideas that didn't always line up with the traditional way of thinking. Case in point, he decided that rather than putting bales out for the cattle in the pens, he would feed them in the open field. That way, any trash material that the cattle left behind – which traditionally would be considered wasted feed – would act as a trap for runoff later in the year. It would also spread out the nutrients that the cattle left behind, rather than having all the manure concentrated in the pen area.

"A lot of people, when you're looking at the old system you've either got to use bale feeders or you've got to do this, that or the other thing, or else there's waste. Whereas, if you look at it this way, really there's no waste there. As long as you're feeding out on the land, there's absolutely no waste," says Johanson.

But the biggest change Johanson has made is with his grazing management.

"We've really gone into a management intensive grazing system, compared to seven or eight years ago when we were doing continuous grazing," says Johanson. "Now we're actually starting to really manage our grass, and we're seeing huge improvements on the fertility of our grass and the amount of growth."

Johanson uses portable string electric fencing to set up paddocks on his land, and grazes his livestock on smaller areas for shorter periods of time. He tries to move the animals through each package of pasture about one and a half times per year, always alternating so different paddocks are being pressured at different times year-to-year.

Of course, rotating through the paddocks meant that Johanson would have to move his cattle a lot more frequently – at some points every 10-14 days. So Johanson built a roughly 90'-wide alleyway running down the centre of

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all his pasture land. This not only made handling the cattle significantly easier, it provided an ideal place to station watering sites that would be accessible from every paddock.

“Getting them into the alleyway for water [works well] – they walk in there, they drink their water and they leave and get back out onto the grass,” says Johanson. “They’re not loitering around the water bowl.”

“We’ve probably got eight and a half miles of water line throughout all our pastures for the summer. For the winter we’re looking at doing another project, where we’re going to bury a little over a mile and a quarter of pipe. That’ll allow us to winter feed on nine or ten quarters of land, where we could actually start doing more backgrounding of calves.”

By allowing a greater recovery period after grazing, Johanson has seen a significant improvement in the variety and density of the various plant species in his pasture.

“I know there were a few places there last year where there had to be 50 or 60 new grass plants in a square foot. It was like a mat starting up,” Johanson says.

“We’re having a lot of fun actually running our pastures,” Johanson continues. “Before it was just a job, and when the grass was gone you sent the cattle home. But now we’re actually growing a bunch more grass, and our first concern is the grass and the cattle are second. They’re the tool to improve our land. And if you can do things that actually start growing more grass, then in the end you’re forced into running more numbers, which is where your profit comes from.”

Johanson’s operation is a featured demonstration site for a partnership between the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority, Ducks Unlimited Canada and other agriculture groups, and extension and conservation agencies. The goal of this partnership is to provide information and assistance to producers in East Central Saskatchewan who would like to implement beneficial management practices within their operation.



“Almost anybody can do any of these ideas, but they’d just do it differently because of the way their land is shaped, or depending on where they’re at,” says Johanson.

Johanson hopes that the demonstration will help producers see the value in making changes, as well as give them some ideas that they can use.

“There’s a number of different things to see. And a lot of it’s the mechanics of how to do it. We’ve done it for four or five years now and we know of people who have been doing it for 16 of 17 years, and the results have been tremendous. And a lot of it is learning how to safeguard from as many problems as possible. Like,

if you don’t set up your wires right, it gets more awkward than it needs to be,” says Johanson.

Johanson is also currently in the process of completing an Environmental Farm Plan (EFP). An EFP is a voluntary, confidential self-assessment and management tool that producers can use to increase their awareness of environmental issues, to examine their current production practices, to identify potential risks, and to develop a practical plan to manage those risks on their farm operation.

For more information on Johanson’s operation or on beneficial management practices, please contact Jason Puckett at (306) 786-5845.

For information on Environmental Farm Planning, please contact:

Yorkton North
Kerry Holderness
Phone: (306) 383-2616
Cell: (306) 554-8610

Yorkton South
James Pollock
Phone: (306) 435-3592

Yorkton West
Kim Hextall
Phone: (306) 697-3079



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This partnership has received funding from the Technical Assistance Component of the Greencover Canada Program.

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