Defining Mob Grazing for the Midwest

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For many graziers, mob grazing is not a new concept. We've heard the mob grazing gurus' talk at conferences, read the articles, and listened to farmers rave or rant about it. Although there has been much discussion, there still seems to be a lack of consensus about what, exactly, mob grazing is and how it should or should not be implemented. "Is it 50,000 or 2,000,000 pounds of animals per acre?" "I heard you have to move your animals eight times a day!" "I can't mob graze, I only have 20 animals." To move beyond the guesswork of the strategy's implementation, we surveyed rotational graziers and conducted focused interviews with farmers who have adopted mob grazing. We were able to more clearly define the practice, explore the perceived pros and cons, and gain insight into how implementation of this strategy is evolving.

We surveyed hundreds of rotational graziers, with a subset of questions for those who had experimented with mob grazing. Respondents varied from skeptical to those who were vocal proponents and early adopters. From this diverse group, many themes arose. We ranked the most often cited definitions, benefits, and drawbacks in order of frequency. Definitions included increased stocking density, increased rest periods, trampled forage, shortened grazing periods, and grazing mature forage. Benefits included even distribution of nutrients, decreased forage selectivity, increased organic matter, weed control, and resilience. Drawbacks included increased labor and time, decreased forage quality, and limited applicability in some environments.

With a clearer idea of what farmers mean when they talk about mob grazing, further questions were asked to get a better idea of what they do when implementing mob grazing. Among those who had experimented with the practice, we found a wide range of variability. We compiled the responses of 58 mob graziers to develop a profile of an "average" farmer who has tried mob grazing. The average Midwestern mob grazier stocks 50,000-250,000 lbs/ac (stocking density), rotates 1-3 times per day, and rests paddocks for 31-60 days. We also found only one-half of the self-identified mob graziers used this practice for the majority of the season, while many graziers used the practice at strategic points throughout the year. These details are in contrast with widely held perceptions of "true" mob grazing practices. Midwestern farmers are adopting the strategy with more moderation than previously thought.

While these findings are helpful in further defining mob grazing and motivating implementation, Gurda felt the project was missing the voices of mob graziers themselves. In 2013, he packed his video camera and travelled to farms in Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin to visit with dairy, beef, and diversified livestock farmers, all of whom had adapted mob grazing to suit their grazing operations. The videos were recently released as a four-part series titled "In Their Own Words." The videos sequentially cover mob grazing in terms of definitions, benefits, risks, and implementation tips. With support from *Hay & Forage Grower* magazine, the UW Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS), the Ceres Trust, and the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, these videos effectively animate our survey findings by allowing farmers to "speak for themselves." Surveys have shown that farmers learn best from each other, and one goal of researchers is to facilitate these educational conversations. The video series is on the UW-Extension Grazing Resources and Research website at fyi.uwex.edu/grazres, under the "Grazing Management Toolbox" tab listed on the left side. These farmers' stories, supported by survey data, provide the most comprehensive picture of mob grazing in practice to date, revealing mob grazing as an emerging management tool with considerable potential along with concurrent challenges that suggest slow and strategic implementation by farmers.