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Crops & Soils/Horticulture

As Grass Gets Growing

As long as grass takes off and grows each spring, we often don't worry much about it. That doesn't mean all is well, however. A monitoring plan through the growing season can be a valuable tool in maintaining productive stands through many different conditions.

Start with a quick look at the soil surface to get an idea of stand density. Specifically, are certain areas of the pasture or hay field better or worse? It could be due to soil type, fertilizer deficiencies, or even over/under grazing. You may have to think back over time to come up with answers, but making a few changes based on what you see *can* make a difference in stand densities – and overall forage production – if we're willing to implement them.

If you do have open spaces, are they filling in with broadleaf weeds? Undesirable forages? If it's a warm season forage stand, are cool season species taking over? In cool season stands, are less productive or lesser quality species increasing? Early spring monitoring can give a heads up about what we might expect from the pasture through the remainder of the season. Knowing broadleaf weeds are increasing can help us manage control or grazing programs to help combat them. Understanding the productivity of bluegrass that has increased over time versus the brome grass we planted can help us manage harvest timing and grazing management.

Last but not least, look for patterns above and beyond those referenced above. Maybe there was a mechanical issue with harvest, fertilizer or weed control equipment. There can even be patterns associated with the timing of hay harvest or grazing. Look back at longer-term management to see if there are patterns – or habits – we need to adjust.

Our goal is long term stand health. Start monitoring now to avoid surprises later.

Fruit Tree Fertilization

Once we get fruit trees established, it's easy to just let it 'do its thing'. If you want to push production a little, however, consider a shot of fertilizer early in the spring. Rates will depend on the age of the tree, product used, and when possible, a soil test.

Fertilizer products differ, but many common mixes are around 30 percent nitrogen with lower amounts of phosphorus and potassium. Since nitrogen is typically the most needed nutrient, higher N products work well. Lawn fertilizers with an analysis in this range are acceptable, so long as they don't contain weed killers or crabgrass preventers.

Younger trees require less fertilizer than older ones. Using the aforementioned 30 percent N mixes, apply one-fourth cup of fertilizer per tree to one to two-year old trees. Increase rates to one half cup per tree for three to four-year old trees and one to two cups per tree for trees five to 10 years old. Trees more than 10 years old should have two to three cups of a 30 percent product applied per tree. Other products can be used (if a soil test calls for P/K, consider a balanced fertilizer), but adjust rates to reach an appropriate nitrogen level.

Tree growth is factor as well. For apple trees, last year's growth should be eight to 10 inches in length. Cherries should show 10 to 12 inches, and peaches should equal 12 to 15 inches of terminal growth. If growth is less than this, apply the higher rates above. If more, apply lesser amounts. Spread fertilizer evenly on the ground *away* from the trunk and to the outer spread of the branches. Water in with at least a quarter inch of water if rain doesn't provide it.

Ross Mosteller

District Extension Agent
Livestock & Natural Resources

Processing Calves at Turnout

True spring calving is in full swing, the grass is greening up where moisture allows and with this new growth of grass, calf processing and/or branding is just around the corner. While brand inspection is not mandatory in Kansas, many ranches utilize brands and spring processing prior to turnout on pasture is often referred to as “branding time”. Moving into this branding time, it is a good time to discuss some calf processing best management practices.

Evaluation of current health status, review of historical health issues and discussing processing vaccination protocols are best discussed with your veterinarian through a valid Veterinary Client Patient Relationship (VCPR). The purpose of the VCPR is for a vet to know the cattle, and the situation, and health/disease challenges. This discussion should be ongoing and addressed well in advance of the busy branding day.

Calf processing can hold a romantic reminiscing of cowboy traditions of family, community and industry in general. This time typically involves extra labor requirements, sometimes bringing in labor less familiar with proper animal health and handling protocols. Clear communication and instruction before the process begins is a must! Even if the cowboy crew is experienced, expectations vary operation to operation. Not having a communicated plan is planning to fail!

An area of focus should be the expectation of low-stress cattle handling. Visit with your help to refresh them on basic cattle handling do's and don'ts of your operation. Sharing expectations of cattle gathering, sorting, and the steps to follow at processing is a good way to ensure everyone is on the same page. Depending on branding methods, discussing the expected branding techniques can improve the efficiency of the day.

Mishandling of animal health products, especially vaccines, can be counterproductive to health goals and is costly as well. Best management practices to ensure vaccines work include:

- When products require mixing, only mix as needed and not more than one hour prior to administration. Efficacy of the product declines outside of this hour window.
- When mixing vaccines, do not over shake. Simply swirling the vaccine in the bottle is enough to ensure a good mix.
- Store vaccine according to the temperature range on the manufacturer label and do not allow them to be exposed to sunlight. Icepacks and coolers are your friend in the field.
- Label syringes and do not allow them to get mixed up with different products. Keep modified live vaccines into a syringe and killed vaccines in another.
- Change your needles every time a syringe is refilled to ensure contamination of the remaining product doesn't happen due to a dirty needle. Replacing needles every ten to fifteen head is suggested.
- Give all injections in the “injection triangle” front of the shoulder in the neck region unless the label specifically advises to administer in a different location.
- Utilize subcutaneous injections when product label allows, to reduce tissue damage.

Research has shown that the stress related to processing and branding for calves was correlated more with the amount of time separated from the dam than the actual processing method. The more efficiently calves return back to their dams, the less stress those calves will experience. Try to work group sizes in relation to the available work time, allowing for minimal separation time. Effective communication between everyone involved will lead to reduced stress for all. Good luck with calf processing, keep praying for rain, green grass and full ponds!

Teresa Hatfield

District Extension Agent
Family and Community Wellness

Rural Childcare Shortage

Kansas is now facing a need for more childcare options for working parents. The problem is significant in our rural areas of Kansas. The COVID-19 pandemic further exasperated the shortage; many in Kansas now refer to this as a childcare crisis. According to Child Care Aware of Kansas, Kansas meets 49% of the needed childcare slots. Since 2020 Kansas has lost 344 childcare providers. Currently, Kansas needs 85,000 childcare slots to meet the current demand. Our local area faces similar childcare challenges as the rest of the state. The Meadowlark Extension District, which encompasses Jackson, Jefferson, and Nemaha counties, needs approximately 977 more childcare slots to meet demand.

Many Kansas families find that both parents are needed in the workforce to provide for their family's financial stability. The cost of food and other necessities demand this, especially with rising costs. Many working parents, however, struggle to find high-quality, flexible childcare at a reasonable price. Childcare is affordable if it costs no more than 7% of the family budget. According to The Economic Policy Institute, infant care in Kansas costs, on average, \$935 per month or \$11,222 per year, which means it costs more than in-state tuition in a state four-year public college. Kansas is one of 33 states where infant care is more expensive than college.

Besides working families, employers could also benefit from quality, affordable childcare. Employees having access to quality childcare improves absenteeism, the number of lost work hours, concentration and focus on the job and morale. Having childcare on-site is also an added benefit in recruiting and retaining employees. Dr. Bradford Wiles K-State Research and Extension Specialist, states, "Before the pandemic, U.S. businesses lost approximately \$4.4 billion annually due to absent workers dealing with childcare breakdowns".

Childcare providers in Kansas consist of childcare centers, licensed family/group childcare homes, preschools, Head Start, and school-aged programs. Childcare workers play an essential role in our communities by caring for our children and providing an environment where they can learn and grow. Most childcare workers, however, are among the lowest-paid of occupations. The average childcare worker in Kansas on average makes \$10.40 per hour. Also, only a few workers receive job-based benefits, such as health insurance, retirement plans, vacation, and sick days. Those workers who have received college degrees make substantially less than their peers in other occupations. Many childcare workers are unable to make ends meet.

K-State Research & Extension has been working with community partners across the state, seeking solutions to the problem. K-State Research and Extension-Meadowlark District will host Dr. Bradford Wiles with K-State Research and Extension Special on Tuesday evening, May 9th, at 5:30 PM at the Courtyard, 426 Pennsylvania Ave, in Holton. Dr. Wiles will talk with residents and community partners in the Meadowlark Extension about the importance of offering quality, affordable childcare. Dr. Wiles is committed to helping communities build capacity for access to childcare. Dr. Wiles helps communities conduct needs assessments and strategically invest in locally driven solutions.

All are welcome to attend the event. We have a virtual option available if you cannot attend in person. We will begin the evening with a light meal at 5:30 PM, followed by Dr. Wiles' presentation. RSVP to the Meadowlark Extension office by May 5th at 785-364-4125 to reserve your meal.

Cindy Williams

District Extension Agent
Family & Community Wellness

“Water: It’s Time to Drink Up”

We are a few weeks into this year’s Walk Kansas program, which promotes physical activity over an 8-week course. While the basis of the program is staying active, an additional key to the program is logging the amount of water participants consume daily.

Did you know that your body is around 60 percent water? It is the most abundant compound in your body and is used by every bodily system. While research varies on exactly how much water each person should consume each day, the Institute of Medicine recommends an adequate intake for men is about 13 cups of liquid a day and 9 cups for women. Your need for liquids depends on many factors, including your health, how active you are, and where you live.

The health benefits to drinking water are vast. From helping with weight loss to better brain function, the list goes on and on. I encourage you to do your own research on all of these benefits. Today, I’d like to share some tips with you that make water the easy beverage choice throughout your busy day.

1. Carry a water bottle with you and keep it refilled. As soon as you hit the bottom of the bottle, head to the office water cooler or faucet and refill so that water is always accessible.
2. Order water when eating out and serve with your meals at home. You’ll save money and reduce calories over other beverage choices.
3. Change the flavor. Adding a wedge of lime or lemon or other liquid water enhancers can boost the flavor and help you drink more water than you usually would.
4. Make it a challenge. Set a goal and track your intake each day. You may even choose to reward yourself when you hit your goal.

Keep in mind that the more active you are; the more water you may need to keep yourself hydrated. As summer approaches, it’s a wonderful time to get into the daily water drinking habit. I encourage you to get outside, be active and....drink up! (water, that is).