SEASONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR
GRAZING MANAGEMENT

Determining Season of Use

When developing a grazing management plan, determining what season you should graze your pastures is typically the first question that must be answered. Before making this determination numerous factors must be considered. This factsheet will attempt to answer some questions that you may have as well as guide you through the process of making these decisions.

Generally, there are no easy solutions as grazing in every season tends to produce both positive and negative consequences. The remainder of this factsheet will try to explain the advantages and disadvantages that may result from grazing in certain seasons.

Spring grazing is often beneficial for a number of reasons.

- Availability of actively growing, succulent upland plants. During the spring the uplands of a majority of BC’s southern interior grasslands produce an abundant amount of succulent plants that often does not exist in the summer, fall and winter months. This is beneficial in that it reduces both livestock foraging in riparian areas and browsing of shrub species.
- Availability of additional water sources. In the spring, many ranges often have additional watering sites available that away from the main riparian area. The availability of this water is typically limited to the spring often drying up in the summer and fall or not developing due to drought conditions. Cool spring temperatures also often discourage livestock from loitering in riparian areas.
- Wet soils may, if given other alternatives, also discourage livestock from entering a riparian area.

Whether its wet soils, cool temperatures, additional forage, water or both, distribution of your livestock will be enhanced if the proper conditions exist. Regardless, a few words of caution must be given before considering spring grazing. In order for spring grazing to be successful, it is extremely important to remove livestock in the spring or early summer. This will allow for plant regrowth and prevent repeated grazing of desirable plants. In addition, due to high soil moisture levels which could lead to soil compaction, bank trampling and subsequent erosion, it is also essential not to graze riparian pastures at this time. Finally in order to maximize livestock production, animals should not be turned out onto pastures with insufficient forage unless supplemental feeding occurs. If supplemental feeding is not occurring, a good rule of thumb is to ensure that at least 10 to 15 cm (4 to 6 inches) of plant material is present before turnout.
Overall, it is extremely important not to graze your pastures throughout the growing season and, if possible, avoid grazing your pastures at the same stage of plant growth year after year.
In some cases annual fall grazing of pastures can be detrimental to pasture and range health. Numerous disadvantages are commonly associated with fall grazing including:

- Lack of plant regrowth- it is extremely important that a portion of plant material remains in order for a riparian plant community to sustain and capture spring runoff lead to a properly functioning pastures and rangelands.

- Lack of succulent plants- following seed set and life cycle completion, most forbs and grasses become less attractive causing livestock to increase their preference for woody plants which often are more nutritious during this time. This switch in preference can limit livestock production and negatively influence riparian health. This is only an issue in riparian areas that either have or have the potential for woody plants to be present.

- Foul weather or lack of nutritious upland plants often congregates cattle in riparian areas resulting in over-utilization of riparian plants and poor herd performance.

Under the following conditions however, fall grazing may actually be beneficial to pasture and range health:

- Fall precipitation that has facilitated new upland grass growth. This new growth may persuade livestock to increase distribution throughout your pasture.
- Enough off-stream water is available to attract livestock away from your riparian area.

In direct contrast to summer grazing, winter grazing of riparian areas may be the least detrimental to pasture and range health. This is especially true in situations where both soil compaction, stream trampling and manure runoff are significant concerns and your pasture is large enough to supplemental feed away from the riparian area. In addition of feed, the availability of accessible water (either in the form of snow or other open watering facilities) will also effectively limit livestock congregation and facilitate the distribution of livestock throughout your pasture. As with fall-grazing however, you must ensure that sufficient plant material remains to protect the soil during spring runoff. In addition, in order to protect the health of your woody plants you also must ensure that use of woody plants is kept to a minimum.
Season-long Grazing

From both a livestock and plant production point of view, season-long grazing in all pastures is considered to be the most detrimental range practice for both riparian and upland areas. As a result, it should be avoided or phased out of your range management scheme and/or plan.