

Some Thoughts on Pasture Management

Pastures are important to bison farmers. Here at Snake River Farm we produce grass-fed animals. That means our bison and our cattle get grass or grass hay only. I know many of you supplement or finish your bison on grain and grain products. Nevertheless, I think most of you use pastures in your operation.

Pasture rotation and good pasture management are not new concepts. I recall our County Agent encouraging pasture rotation over fifty years ago.

I have always rotated pastures, more or less. But, it is only in the past ten years that I have really focused on improving grasslands through good management.

It works!

The textbooks, the articles, the courses and the experts all encourage the same steps.

Move the animals frequently. Keep the number of grazing animals per acre as high as possible. Give the grass enough time to regrow.

Some high density cattle grazers and dairy farmers actually move their animals twice a day or more.

Moving the herd daily does give terrific results but it is not something I intend to routinely do with bison.

Don't misunderstand, I believe high density, short duration grazing is great for pastures. It just isn't all that simple to do with a bison herd.

I compromise and the results are pretty good. Our pastures keep getting better. Of course, since this light sand was in row crops for many decades, there is a lot of room for improvement.

Let me give you some background details.

Our 225 acres are divided into 25 paddocks. The smallest is only one acre in size, the largest is 30 acres.

Through those paddocks we graze our herd of around 40 bison and a herd of about the same number of beef cattle. The bison herd contains one mature bull, cows, calves, yearlings and two-year olds. The beef herd is almost all yearling heifers. I keep a beef cow or two for leadership but that is a different story. All the bison two-year olds and all the beef yearlings are harvested each fall.

I train both herds to come and to follow when I call. I walk ahead of the beef herd. I ride a tractor ahead of the bison. Even with the tractor I get out of their way when they see the next open gate.

You know how they are. A herd of bison moving from one pasture to another cannot seem to resist the thrill of a good stampede.



The grazing results in the one acre pasture are exactly as the experts predict. The first time I put them in that pasture I thought I had ruined it. I moved them in early in the day and by evening all the edible grass was gone. The soil surface was covered with a mixture of trampled grass, mud and manure. It looked terrible.

Thirty days later it was knee high and ready for another rotation. The grasses were thicker, the brushy spots were less, and the annual weeds were mostly gone.

I did have to replace the gate posts with heavy timber. Even a short stampede can be mighty hard on fences. Most of our pastures are between five and ten acres in size. Three pastures are about 30 acres each. The five-to-ten-acre pastures work fine but I had to learn to design the gateways and arrange the flow of each



pasture so the bison can get in with little or no damage. Damage to the fences, that is. In addition to solid and easily visible gate openings, they need enough room to circle and calm down. Anytime they go through a gate they seem to think this is the start of a run to North Dakota.

The larger pastures are the ones I use when we intend to be away from the farm for a few days. The bison seem to be more relaxed in larger areas. I guess you would expect that. When I am away from home, if the bison are more relaxed, I am more relaxed.

At times during the grazing season it is advantageous for me to run the bison and beef together. Putting the two herds together gets closer to the ideal of high numbers and a quick graze off. Unfortunately, I am unwilling to put the two herds together except in the larger pastures. The herds do not mingle and each herd needs its space. In general the herds ignore each other but if the cattle get too close, a young bison bull will drive them away. I worry that a beef animal could get horned. Not sure how I would deal with that and I would rather not find out. Since the beef animals are mostly heifers one or more is always in heat. That does not seem to interest the bison males, however.

Separating the herds has not been a problem. It just requires the patience to wait for the right opportunity. When one herd happens to be near a gate and the other is in a far corner, I just move the near herd out quickly and quietly.

I have done this for enough years to be comfortable with the system. The pastures keep getting better. Of course it could be a lot different if a beef bull were involved. If you are not rotating pastures frequently now it will probably be worth your time and effort to do so. There is no perfect system. You can take it one step at a time to improve your pastures in ways that work for you. You will learn as you go.

Have a good summer.

Tom Barthel, Director

2012 Article MNBA