

**Juneau County Grazing Group  
Some Thoughts and Suggestions  
February 4, 2005  
Andy Hager, Taylor County**

- 1. Put some serious and regular thought into the group's purpose.**  
It's one thing to get a group together and just "wait and see" what good things occur. It's another thing entirely to get the group together to accomplish something specific.
- 2. Plan on how you will do some regular "needs assessment", just to "take the group's pulse". How will you find out what they need and want?**  
It's easy to let this default to "We'll figure that out from what they want to talk about", which often leads to "Gee, we got the group together, but nothing really came of it". Do this "on purpose" – don't leave it to chance.
- 3. Don't be too concerned about "pushing the group too hard".**  
If the group's going to accomplish anything together, some "organizing" will be helpful...and necessary. If the group really doesn't want to go somewhere they've been "pushed", they'll tell you – and it's good to find that out.
- 4. In planning discussions, be as specific as you can be about what you hope to accomplish as a group. You can always "back off a bit", if you need to.**  
Having a defined purpose and direction will relieve you of the "care and feeding" of the group. Groups support themselves, when the purpose and function are clear to everyone involved.
- 5. "Leading the group" can turn you into being the group's "entire engine". Have a plan or method in mind to "work yourself out of a job".**  
You might think about leadership positions in terms of "annual appointments, with no possibility of re-election". In such cases, those who benefit now from your leadership will know that their time and opportunity to lead is coming up at a defined later date. (This might take the form of the "January reorganization meeting").
- 6. Try to avoid "cutting to the chase" and looking for resources, until you have a clear purpose that requires those resources.**  
Going immediately after grant money, for example, can end up with the grantors' expectations setting the direction for your group. Set your own direction – then look for resources that are supportive of where you want to go.
- 7. Diversity in background and experience is a real strength in a group, but it can also be a "double-edged sword".**  
Lots of wonderful ideas and solutions come from all that diversity, but you can also end up with a wide diversity of expectations. How will you help the group define, accept and prioritize all those diverse expectations?

- 8. What kinds of expectations should individuals reasonably be able to have of the group, i.e. what can they reasonably expect to get from their participation?**
- 9. What kinds of expectations should the group (collectively) be able to have of individual group member, i.e. is everything “free” to the individual, or is there some basic level of commitment expected as a “price for participation”?**
- 10. What does your “Best Possible Outcome” look like for this group?**  
What will change, what will people learn, how will those things be useful to them, what would “the most benefit to the most people” look like?

## **A Pasture Walk Teaching System**

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If you have never been to an “official” Great River Graziers Pasture walk, you may not know what to expect. The pasture walks that this group requests and that we conduct are structured educational events set in an outdoor environment. Farms are selected for specific grazing questions and topics that can be shown and discussed in about a 1 ½ to 2 hour format. Those participating and facilitating bring their wealth of experience to the facilitated discussion and are expected to share their observation and thoughts to answer the host farmer’s questions and the participants’ questions.

Here is an overview of a typical pasture walk. The farm and date have been selected weeks or months in advance and promoted and advertised. The farmer has gone over with the facilitator the specific grazing questions they wish answered or discussed at the walk. Pasture walk road signs have been placed to aid finding the farm. On the specific date (usually the 1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> Tue of the month) usually at 10:30 am, interested participants gather at the farm for the event. On the Farmers OK, the facilitator asks the participants to gather up in a circle and the “official” rules for the walk are given. Those two rules are: 1. We gather in a circle with one person talking and the others listen. No side conversations. 2. We want you to feel secure to voice your thoughts but disagree agreeably. No personal attacks. From there, three or four sites on the farm are examined and a group consensus or overview is established on the question or topic that has been given for that specific pasture walk and other questions that are raised in the discussion. At the end of the walk there are generally light refreshments and a chance to socialize.

The pasture walk incorporates a field day component, walking to specific sites on the farm, with guided group discussion, to deliver a premium educational event. While some aspects of show-and-tell are a part of the Pasture walk, this is not the main focus. The discussion and shared participant observations are the main focus with the specific farm sites used to highlight or clarify the individual’s host farmers’ or participant questions.

This system works best for groups under 30 people, though with careful use I have used it for groups of 50. It is very important that a sense of shared responsibility for the pasture walk/facilitated discussion be imparted so that those attending buy into the educational event. If there is a shared sense of responsibility, attendees will both help focus the discussion and find shared answers to the proceedings.

## Handling Large Pasture Walks:

### Before the Walk:

*If you suspect a large crowd may arrive-(more than 25):*

Be sure the host farmer and family is up to the task, some may be excellent managers but are not good candidates for any walk for various reasons.

Consider Port a-potties

Utilize a portable PA system if possible, make sure the speakers use it properly.

Choose appropriate farmers. Be sure you choose above average pasture managers that can answer questions, without getting too rattled or offended, unless it is geared toward beginners for some reason.

Know the farm well or walk the farm with the farmer about a week before the walk and take notes of interesting management techniques, points of interests, comments the farmer makes. Use these during the walk to ask probing questions of the host farmer to further discussion.

Use these notes to write an attention grabbing pasture walk description. Let folks know what they will see at the farm, list unique features, highlight what they do well in farm write up.

Advertise well: Postcards to existing graziers, but consider press releases, Ads in local papers, mailing lists of licensed dairy farms, FSA producer lists (can be long and old), GIS generated lists of neighbors with more than 20 acres, FFA groups, High School Ag classes, also keep Conservation folks in the loop LCD's, NRCS, UWEX, local DNR. *Keep in mind, you want to attract the new graziers or support for graziers.*

Consider dividing the crowd up, if two or three knowledgeable people, who know the farm, they can lead individual walks, this is going to be a show and tell basically.

Consider having stations for the walk with separate speakers at each point of interested. Break the group down and rotate between stations.

Consider the use of haywagons for transportation and crowd control as well.

Choose all four seasons for walks, we cannot be in winter denial.

Mix it up. Choose topics for walks, Bring in guest speakers-timely appropriate, specific task and time limit (that the farmer knows about)

### **Day of the Walk (Planned or unplanned crowds):**

Set firm ground rules at the start of the walk.

Introduce host farmers and other significant attendees; always acknowledge elected officials provide sign in sheets. Do not introduce all folks present; it will use up too much time.

Ask probing questions of the farmer if the subject is waning, based upon your knowledge of the farm. Make sure they bring out topics they excel at. The bigger the crowd the more nervous the host may get them...good questions from you will help them relax and remember key points.

The experienced farmer is the expert this day. That is who folks came to see, keep it in mind, don't let someone else steal the show (including yourself), get back to the host farmer.

Keep background talk to a minimum, several reminders will be needed.

Emphasis is on management, not so much the tools of the trade.

Keep crowd together. Pull crowd together at key points, let host farmer make points, some discussion may take place. Move onto next point.

### **Ending the Walk:**

Bring to a conclusion, recap what was learned, thank host family, all involved in walk

May Provide refreshments, time for socializing after the learning event, also lots of one-on-one learning can take place.

**Preparing for Pasture Walks**  
**Grazing Educators Workshop**  
**April 4, 2012**  
**Craig Saxe, Juneau County UW-Extension**

1. Successful grazing groups exist and continue because they are “owned” and supported by the people who benefit from them. What will encourage group members to pitch in?
2. Some “structure” can be helpful. It’s important to find the right balance for the group. It’s also important to identify who is going to do this work? Ideally this work load should be spread out.
3. Define the groups “purpose” and your role in that purpose
4. Start with a “work plan”
  - Develop an advisory committee and meet 1 or 2 times per year
  - Lay out what you intend to do; how many pasture walks, when, where, etc.
5. Facilitate a process that makes this effort producer driven
6. Develop a PR Campaign
  - Flyers, mailings, emails, free radio and newspaper spots, etc.
  - If funding is available, consider paid advertisement; radio, newspapers, etc.
7. Develop a mailing and email list. Have people sign in at every event and continually update
8. Consider the educational versus the social component
  - The educational component needs some fore-thought; plan for the educational component. The social component often comes naturally?
    - Invite special speakers to talk on a specific topic
    - Bring literature to share/discuss
    - Bring a grazing gadget to talk about
9. A preliminary visit or pre-walk is beneficial

- Talk to the producer prior to the upcoming pasture walk, review possible items needed (aerial maps, variety trial maps, etc.)
- Walk the pasture with the producer (preferably the day before) in preparation for the upcoming pasture walk
  - Spend this one-on-one time to identify and further clarify issues and look for areas of interest
  - Design and review the route to be taken for the upcoming pasture walk

# Grass Series

What is it: For the Coulee Grazier Group it has meant many different events/walks/educational opportunities on topics the group is interested in more about or having more in-depth discussions about. Most of the topics are chosen by group consensus during planning sessions. This meeting is usually attended by 14 to 20 producers of all animal types. The group has a brief discussion of funds available and what the farmers want to see and learn going into that particular growing season.

One Grass Series was a twice monthly meeting on 1 farm and each participant was to read and prepare for a discussion on that selected chapter of “Greener Pastures on Your Side of the Fence” while walking the farm and studying Bill Murphy’s philosophy ( similar design to the “Chapter a Day” on the radio). This intensive educational exposure is very valuable in terms of understanding the mechanics behind management of grass sward. This design was replicated for a NRCS Grazing Training in which 12 District and Soil Conservationists attended.

Grass Series have also been held in many different designs. One focused on a single dairy farm which was walked monthly to discuss management of grass and milking cows to optimize pasture and milk production. Another was a series of twilight meetings focused at beef production on very topographically challenged land in Buffalo County. These sessions typically numbered 30 to 40 full and part time producers and were held on 4 different farms, each at a different stage of implementation (beginner, intermediate, advanced ) with unique challenges like distance and slope to water and wide varieties of soils types. These group/topic focused series give very real management activity tips for all seasons with all types of livestock.

The importance of a grass series, whatever the design, is that it is producer driven. As an educator it is critical to empower the producers who are making tremendous strides forward in understanding proper grass and livestock management which means profitable small and medium size businesses that are making an economic impact in the communities they depend on.

It is critical that when choosing farms to participate in a grass series that good communication between the producer and the group is understood. Some producers want thoughtful input good and not on the various tools they use in their grazing systems, the style of their grazing, how the livestock and land look at various stages of growth and development despite the variety of weather and other variables that we are having to deal with at the time. Other participants want it to be more of a learning opportunity for producers just considering or beginning to graze. These are excellent forums to share information and they are very productive. Care needs to be taken to not overwhelm new comers.

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## Winter Discussion Groups

The winter discussion groups were developed out of producers wanting to continue to meet during outside of the growing season. At times this could mean bringing in another producer that was in the news or a private industry representative to discuss the philosophy of what they are selling. University professors have also been brought in to discuss entomology and soil health to reproductive efficiency and grass farm financials. Depending on the date of the planning meeting and the actual discussion group sessions many things can happen. One winter the group chose to have several discussion group meeting on farm to learn more about properly outwintering milking cows, two of the 4 sessions were canceled due to snow storms and the two that were held the group walked in 20 below to the outwintering sites. A lot was learned by the group.

These meetings are organized around a planning meeting which the group takes about the needs they have and interesting articles, books etc that they have read and would like to learn more. The group has a brief discussion of funds available to bring in speakers, especially other farmers that take time away from their businesses to help others with the same production interests—producing milk and meat out of grass. The group typically schedules 1 meeting per month and selects topics for each meeting. They suggest who they would like to have speak and then depending on availability that person is invited to come.

Producers find this venue valuable to being the driving force behind the information that they are receiving. Politely asking some speakers to come and talk about the philosophy of the products that their companies are selling, not necessarily “what is on sale today”. This has been very effective and the group has built a strong diversity of soil chemistry, plant/animal interaction, plant genetics and much much more. At time topics can be controversial but this long standing group of grass farmers is very respectful to each others opinions and very helpful to the new faces that grace our network each year.

As in the grass series, it is critical for the success of the group that the topics are chosen by the farmers. They then have a vested interest in attending and providing valuable input to the discussion at hand.

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**Needs Assessment:**  
What is it and why does it matter?

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What is the goal of  
your program?

*How do you know?*

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What is needs assessment?

- o A systematic process to guide program decision-making.
- o A means of justifying your efforts to funders and supervisors.
- o A means of generating support and partnership with network members and other clientele.
- o Needs assessment  $\neq$  evaluation.  
*(although they both use some of the same tools)*

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**What do you need to know?**

- o What educational topics are your members or clientele interested in?
- o What are their program delivery preferences? (pasture walks, workshops, email, newsletters, websites, etc.)
- o What are their broader needs? (business planning, manure storage, milk quality improvement, access to markets)
- o What big agriculture issues are important to them?
- o Who are they?

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**Who is your audience?**

- o Grazing network members?
- o The broader agriculture community?
- o The general public?
- o What do you need to know about them?
  - o Demographics: age, gender, years farming, etc.
  - o Farm data: type of farm, herd or flock size, acres in pasture, other crops, enterprises, etc.
  - o What are their interests and needs and how can you serve them?

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**Needs assessment tools**

- o Existing data
- o Direct survey
- o Key informant interviews
- o Listening sessions, community forums
- o Focus groups

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**Needs assessment tools**

- Existing data
  - Already existing statistical data can be used to obtain insights into the character of the community you serve.
    - Demographic information
    - Ag Census
    - Other existing surveys
    - Land, soil, and climate information

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**Needs assessment tools**

- Direct survey
  - Use surveys to gather information from your network or a representative sample of livestock farmers.
  - Paper, on-line, telephone interviews, personal interviews.

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**Needs assessment tools**

- Key informant interviews
  - This approach identifies community leaders and decision-makers who have a big picture view of community needs.
  - Can involve a written questionnaire or interview.

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**Needs assessment tools**

- Listening sessions, community forums
  - A public meeting or meetings are held providing self-selected community members to express their needs and suggest ideas for meeting them.

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**Needs assessment tools**

- Focus groups
  - A group of people selected for their particular skills, experience, or views are guided through a structured discussion.
  - Group interaction generates insights into community needs and ideas on addressing them.

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**The needs assessment process**

- Identify your audience
- Involve partners in program delivery
- Determine what information needs to be collected
- Identify data sources and methods
- Collect data
- Analyze and summarize results
- Prioritize needs
- Plan and carry out program
- Evaluate impacts: did you meet the identified needs?

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