

*Welcome.* In the GrassWorks Guidebook you will find practical information and great tips from experienced graziers. If you are new to grazing this book will be especially helpful. If you've been grazing awhile, you'll discover new ideas.

The Guidebook is divided into nine sections:

- Getting Started**
- Pasture Basics**
- Nutrient Management**
- Livestock Management**
- Good Advice**
- Marketing Your Products**
- Economics**
- Resources**
- Fences, Lanes, Systems, Watering**



Enjoy the book. *Good reading and good grazing.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the late 1950s, revolutionary pasture management concepts were introduced in *Grass Productivity* by Frenchman Andre Voisin, who called this method “Rational Grazing.” In recent decades, with the introduction of portable, high-voltage electric fencing, his ideas have been put to use with enthusiasm in North America. The term evolved to Intensive Rotational Grazing and then Management Intensive Grazing (MIG) or, among many graziers, simply “managed grazing.”

**Managed grazing involves moving a group of livestock through paddocks of high-quality grasses and legumes, with stocking rates high enough so that the entire sward is grazed off before animals are moved to a fresh section of pasture.** The grazed paddock is then allowed to rest and re-grow before it is grazed again. This method spreads fertility-building manure, contributes to soil health, cleans up weed species, strengthens roots systems and allows legumes to compete against taller, faster growing grasses. Pasture plants under managed grazing are more vigorous, nutritious and highly digestible than those in unmanaged pastures, so livestock are healthier and more productive.

The *GrassWorks Grazing Guide* is designed to help farmers begin a new managed grazing operation, transition to a managed grazing system or better manage existing pastures. It contains practical information on seeding pastures, monitoring soil health, managing livestock, marketing your products and building lanes, fences and watering systems. It also contains insights and advice from people who have many years of experience working with farmers or who are farmers themselves. Although some contributions in the Guide are specific to dairy production, most are general enough to benefit graziers of all species. Additional grazing resources have also been included.

GrassWorks, Inc. is a statewide producer-run 5019(c)(3) non-profit organization that is dedicated to fostering grass-based agriculture in Wisconsin and the region. The organization endeavors to educate policy makers and consumers as well as farmers about the benefits of managed grazing. GrassWorks functions as a clearinghouse of grazing related events and resources, listing area grazing specialists and posting a full calendar of pasturewalks, field days, courses and conferences on its website [www.grassworks.org](http://www.grassworks.org). It also organizes the annual Grazing Conference, which draws graziers, agricultural professionals, researchers, consumers and policy makers from around the state and the region. GrassWorks members serve as mentors to beginning graziers and are often invited to speak at events related to grazing and sustainable agriculture.

## Why Grazing?

Too often we assume that “progress,” in general, and especially in agriculture, moves in one direction without deviation. We have been told that human ingenuity can and must triumph over nature, that large scale production and distribution is the most efficient way to produce food and that the future depends on increasingly complex and expensive technologies. From this perspective, livestock farming looks like a daunting undertaking. It requires huge capital investments not only for land but also for housing, storage buildings, tractors and other equipment, monitoring systems, genetic resources and chemical and energy inputs. Anyone interested in raising livestock could easily become discouraged before he or she even begins. And, for those already farming, keeping pace with the advancement of technology (for questionable benefits) presents a financial risk.

Fortunately, what constitutes “progress” in agriculture has become the subject of some debate in recent decades. Concerns about food safety, animal welfare, malnutrition and obesity, family farms loss, degradation of habitat, resource depletion and climate change have led many to question those basic assumptions and seek out alternatives. In increasing numbers, people are opting to support alternative farming and food systems that rely on an understanding of the complex interrelationships between and within natural and human systems. This perspective acknowledges that we humans are dependent on the natural environment. It assumes that human ingenuity is utilized best by working with nature rather than trying to dominate it.

*After all, some things do not change. Now, as in the beginning, it is the biology (not the technology) of living plants that turns sunlight into food. Animals eat the plants and provide the milk, the meat and the eggs that nourish and sustain us.*

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This basic idea is at the center of managed grazing. In managed grazing systems, cattle, poultry, sheep, goats or pigs are grazed through paddocks of high-quality legumes and grasses in cycles of harvest, then rest and re-growth. Rotational grazing works with biological processes to build soil fertility, preserve and protect water resources, increase the diversity of native plants and ensure that animals are healthy and productive. Well-managed pastures do not require high amounts of synthetic inputs and pastured herds have fewer cases of mastitis and other problems that may require medical intervention. In addition, although establishing new pastures and paddocks does require some initial investment, grazing is highly cost effective. In fact, managed grazing has been shown to be one of the best predictors of success for start-up dairy farms. Good pasture management saves money spent on feed, soil inputs and fossil fuels, because the tractor

stays parked and the cows do the harvesting, feeding and manure spreading. Grazing not only makes conventional markets less risky but also provides diverse opportunities for niche marketing.

More and more consumers are investing food dollars in farming systems that reflect their values: locally grown, organic, grass-fed. Grass-based products are an important part of thriving local food systems and many graziers direct market meat, milk and eggs. Managed grazing is also an important production tool for organic farmers, especially with new pasture requirements in the National Organic Program, and is considered a gateway practice for who want to transition to organic certification. Moreover, as more studies reveal the environmental and nutritional benefits of grass-based agriculture, the grass-fed food itself industry continues to grow. Managed grazing allows beginning as well as experienced farmers to make the most of their operation and to build a secure future.



### **Develop a Vision of What You Want to Achieve**

*Our lives seem to be built around solving problems. It is a massive paradigm shift to embrace the notion of building a life focused on achieving a vision. Solving problems is exhausting and expensive. It requires energy from you. If you've identified the right vision, achieving it is exhilarating and may create money. The energy comes from the vision. It's organic and pulls you toward it. When one focuses on the vision, many of the problems we spent so much time addressing simply slip away.*

**David Pratt, Ranch Management Consultants**