



CONVERTING FROM CRP TO GRAZING

OVERVIEW

Many landowners choose to put a portion of their expired CRP acres into grazing because of the forage benefits that CRP grass cover provides for cattle and livestock. Here's a few considerations that can help you determine if grazing is a suitable alternative and how to develop an effective grazing strategy.

PREPARATION FOR GRAZING

One of your first considerations should be facilities maintenance. Have the fences and water been maintained in the last few years? If not, these costs need to be figured in the program. Using temporary electric fencing and hauling water maybe an alternative until more permanent stock water and fences can be installed or repaired.

The next step is to evaluate the overall grass stand. Most CRP lands have a large build-up of residue in the grasses. The residue needs to be removed to improve the palatability and vigor of the stand. Mowing is a highly-effective option for removing the excess biomass accumulation while also maintaining the integrity of the soil cover.

MOWING

Mowing with a flail-type mower can remove the built-up residue in an older CRP grass stand. Mowing results in less physiological damage to the grasses compared to other methods such as burning, plus mowing keeps the soil cover intact and helps with erosion control. However, be cautious when moving shrubs, as it can kill some species such as sagebrush. Other shrubs like rabbitbrush and horsebrush will sprout back and may continue to grow above pre-

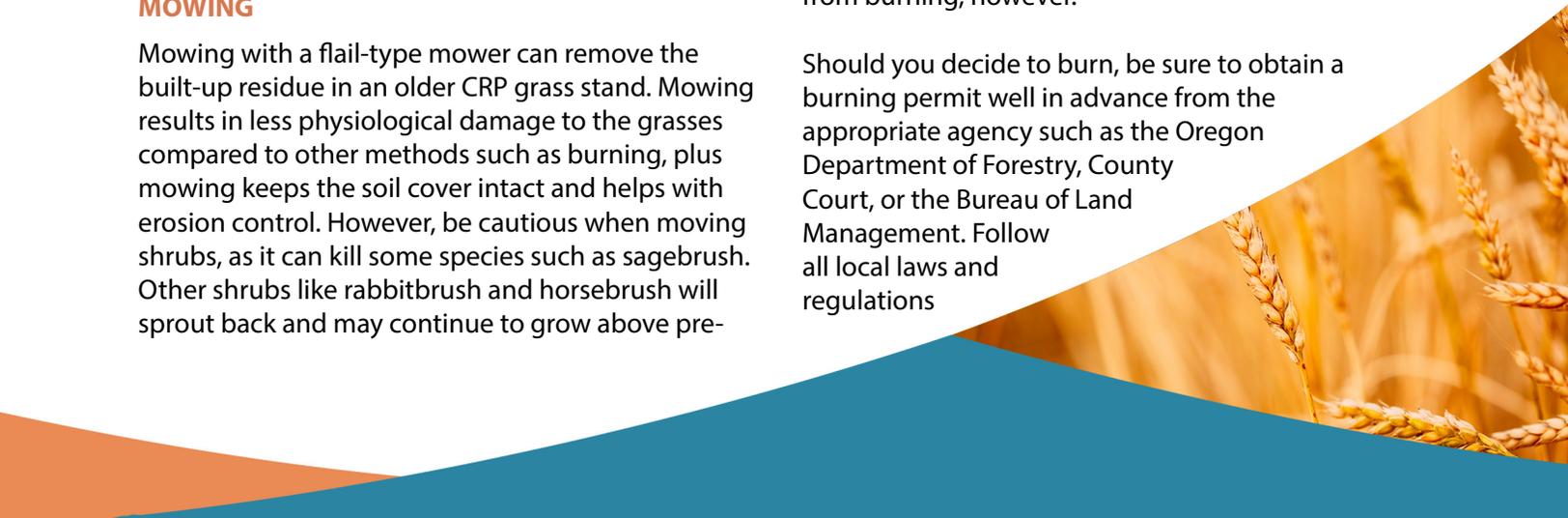
mowing density. Mowing should be completed in either the spring or fall. Steep slopes may limit mowing in some areas.

BURNING

Performing a prescribed burn on your expired CRP grass stands can help remove residues to prep the land for grazing, but it requires careful planning and can pose more risks than mowing. Ideal residue burning should take place in the fall, but early spring burnings can also be effective. If you decide to burn in the fall, wait until after the first fall rains have occurred. In fact, burning should be done two or three days after a light rain. Some moisture is needed in the vegetation and grasses to keep the fire relatively cool. By having a cool fire, the heat that is generated will not damage the crowns of the grass plants. A hot fire can damage or even kill some of the plants, especially those with fine leaves.

Most fires will reduce plant vigor. Generally, the hotter the fire, the more the plant vigor will be reduced. Some shrub species such as sagebrush will be killed by the fire while rabbitbrush and horsebrush may increase after the burn. There's a small fertilizing effect from burning, however.

Should you decide to burn, be sure to obtain a burning permit well in advance from the appropriate agency such as the Oregon Department of Forestry, County Court, or the Bureau of Land Management. Follow all local laws and regulations



regarding agricultural burning. USDA strongly recommends that you develop and follow a formal burn plan.

FERTILIZATION

Fertilization may help to improve the vigor and overall productivity of your grass stand; but it's generally economical only at the higher elevations above the 14-inch rainfall zone. Before applying any fertilizers, get your soil tested so that you can accurately assess the soil nutrient needs. Once you have the soil test results, contact your local NRCS office or Extension Service for fertility recommendations and advice.

STOCKING RATES

You'll need to carefully determine the stocking rates for the areas you plan to graze. If you have a multi-species seeding, evaluate the composition as some species are more palatable than others. If the composition is such that two or more species have wide differences in palatability, such as big bluegrass and tall wheatgrass, one of the species will carry the grazing load while the other will be used very little. These differences need to be taken into consideration when determining your stocking rate.

The best method to determine the stocking rate is to clip predetermined sized plots, though it is very time consuming. The following guidelines may help you determine your estimated initial stocking rate, but further on-site evaluation are necessary to confirm initial stocking estimates and species compositions.

- ❑ Low elevation, fine sandy loam and silt loam soils, moderately deep to deep. 8-12 inch rainfall. Production will range from 0.5 to 1.0 AUMs/Acre.
- ❑ Mid-elevation, silt loam soils, moderately deep, 12-16 inch rainfall: Production will vary from 0.75 to 1.25 AUMs/Acre
- ❑ High-elevation, silt loam soils, moderately deep 16-22 inch rainfall: Production varies from 1.0 to 1.5 AUMs/Acre
- ❑ High-elevation, sandy to moderately heavy soils, moderately deep, 10-12 inch rainfall on the High Desert in central and southeast Oregon. Production ranges from 0.5 to 1.0 AUMs/ Acre

*AUM = Animal Unit Month

Often times native rangeland is fenced in through CRP contracts. The carrying capacity of this rangeland should be estimated and added into the forage produced on the CRP lands. Because palatability can vary significantly between seedings and native range, it's a good idea to monitor any trends on native range to ensure its productivity doesn't decline.

GRAZING SYSTEM

Many operators should take the opportunity to improve their existing grazing systems with the addition of one or two pastures of CRP seedings. CRP seedings, just like native range, demand periods of rest or deferment to allow the root systems to expand and to allow the land's carbohydrates to replenish. For advice or recommendations about your grazing system, contact your local NRCS office or your local Extension Service.



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