

Virginia's Cow/Calf Producers Grazing More and Feeding Less Hay

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In year 2015, a small team of Virginia Cooperative Extension Agents from the Northern Piedmont and Northern Shenandoah Valley started an initiative called "Graze 300 VA." With the help from farmers, industry, the USDA NRCS, and local Soil and Water Conservation Districts the group developed a mission statement, vision, and logo to aid the effort. "For many years I have known that extending the grazing season would be good for cow/calf producers in the Northern Valley" says Extension Agent Bobby Clark. "However, the timing never seemed right to engage the issue. And, then, Extension Agent Carl Stafford mentioned the idea of calling the effort *Graze 300.*" From those small conversations, Graze 300 VA has grown into a statewide initiative involving 30 Extension Agents and Specialists working in partnerships with farmers, industry representatives, and many different agencies.

"The effort has grown" says Extension Agent Carl Stafford. "We see more and more good practices being implemented. However, we wanted to get a better handle on the efforts statewide. So, we teamed up with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service to survey farmers." Five hundred eighteen Virginia cow/calf producers who collectively own 96,239 cows responded. The survey methodology is described as a Convenience Sample. Thus, experts cannot develop a confidence interval (for example, we cannot be 75% or 99% confident that the data represents all cow/calf producers in Virginia). However, Extension Agents believe the data are very representative of the state. "Survey results were collected through an on-line survey and in person at livestock auction barns, Extension meetings, and through Extension Agents meeting one-on-one with farmers. We reached a broad cross-section of livestock producers. The survey represents 17% of all beef cows in the state. It includes cow/calf producers from 76 different Virginia counties and appears to be very well distributed on a county-by-county basis. Thus, we believe it is a real good survey" says Bobby Clark.

Among respondents, 5.8% of all cow/calf producers are feeding hay 77 days or less making their grazing days 288 days or more. "I believe we are making progress" says Extension

Agent Bobby Clark. “The leaders and innovators of the livestock community are showing that extending the grazing season can be done. This is a credit to the entire farming community to Extension and to other partner agencies working on grazing management.”

The grazing management required to extend the grazing season has added environmental and production benefits. The sod in well managed pastures is thicker than sod typically found in continuously grazed pastures. This reduces runoff, soil erosion, and nutrient losses. So, extending the grazing season typically means fewer fertilizer inputs are needed. And, because thicker sod also captures more water in sudden rainfall events, the pastures are more productive during summer dry periods when occasional hard storms are the only source of moisture. Fewer hay feeding days also means less of the damage that occurs with winter feeding.

Extension Agents statewide believe there is room for plenty more farmers to extend their grazing season. The survey data also shows that 80% of the respondents are feeding more than 120 days which means grazing less than 245 days. “From my experience, the cost of hay, grass management strategies, stocking rate and the corresponding effect these have on hay feeding days will generally be the most important driver of profitability on most cow-calf operations” says University of Kentucky Economist Greg Halich. Extending the grazing season also applies to sheep, goats, and horses.

Virginia Cooperative Extension has redoubled its effort to increase the Graze 300 VA Movement. The team was recently awarded a \$27,000 grant from the Virginia Tech College of Agriculture Strategic Plan Advancement Integrated Internal Competitive Grants Program. The grant has four objectives. To help achieve these, Extension has engaged 14 stakeholders representing farmers, farm cooperatives, USDA NRCS, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, American Farmland Trust, and the Virginia Forage and Grassland Council.

- Objective #1: Complete research to better understand the barriers to farmers changing management to extend their grazing season.
- Objective #2: Improve the competency of all partner agencies and agribusiness by providing in-depth grazing management training.

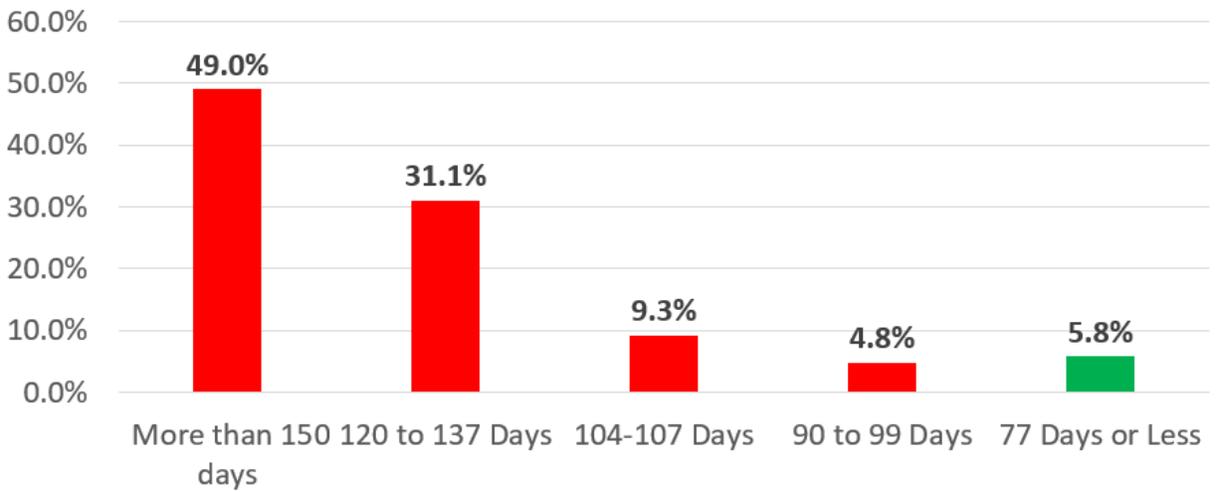
- Objective #3: Develop better educational resources to reach out to Virginia's farmers.
- Objective #4: Broaden the use of technology to further advance the Graze 300 VA Initiative.

Extension Agent John Benner is leading the team to broaden the use of technology. Four different extension agents including Benner visited Ireland as part of an international Extension exchange program. They all came back and recommended that Virginia consider some of the practices used in Ireland.

Both Clark and Stafford would like to see 20% of all grazing livestock grazing 300 days sometime in the next decade. "This would be good for water quality and good for farm profitability" they say. However, both also recognize that extending the grazing season is not an easy task. Livestock producers can extend the grazing season on their own but with state and federal cost-share dollars the rate of adoption is increasing. These "cost share" funds pay a portion of the cost of installing alternative watering systems, excluding livestock from streams, and installing interior cross fencing. Achieving this goal will take a team effort involving state and federal agencies and our stakeholder farmers.

The survey responses provide additional unique insight into farmer's grazing practices. Fifty-five percent of the respondents said they stockpile fescue for winter feeding and 56% said they feed hay daily. If you are interested in Graze 300 VA, feel free to contact your local Extension Office. There are Extension offices located in every county in Virginia, just search Virginia Cooperative Extension and your county.

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Number of Hay Feeding Days for Respondents Who Said They Were Primarily Cow/Calf Producers



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