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MOB GRAZING – A GRAZING STRATEGY FOR DRY LAND

In 2021, INNOVATION met Manuel Winter in the Austrian Marchfeld region where he is involved in a research project that explores a special grazing strategy called „mob grazing“ for his master’s degree thesis.

Innovation: Mr. Winter, what made you take up this kind of research and getting interested in mob grazing?

Winter: When I was studying at BOKU University in Vienna, I served internships on Canadian and Argentinian farms where I first learned about this approach. Since I had done some studying on grazing systems before, I became intrigued and wanted to learn more. I then chose the subject for my bachelor’s thesis and now I’m also writing my master’s thesis on mob grazing. For this, I carried out field trials that involved grazing the animals on various grass mixes and recording the daily weight gains.

What does mob grazing mean?

Winter: Mob grazing is a „grazing strategy“ for dry regions. It is not a rigid system and is mostly used in drought regions where it is not necessarily applied to all pasture fields but to only those for which it is suitable. Many farmers use mob grazing only during one or two growth periods for creating a layer of mulch in the field and then go back to an adapted pasture grazing system. The plants in a mob grazed field are given more time to develop and grow tall. Then a large group of animals graze for a short time, eating the plants and trampling on much of the growth, thereby creating a layer of mulch that protects the soil

and serves as a sustained source of food for the soil organisms. For a successful application of the system it is necessary that recovery periods are long and stocking densities high.

The long recovery period gives the plants more time to regenerate and grow than they would usually have. In dry regions, the recovery period can be as long as 50-60 days. Mob grazing is basically short duration which helps re-growth; and the animals are quickly moved to another pasture. Re-growth is much taller than in usual grazing systems (lucerne grows to up to 1m instead of just 15-20cm). This long recovery period allows the plants to store



» MOB GRAZING IS SUITABLE FOR EXTENSIVE GRASS MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS. IT REQUIRES EXTENSIVE FIELDS. «

Manuel Winter



» THE SPECIES-RICH GRASS MIX COUNTRY MULTILIFE MAY HAVE ATTRIBUTED TO THE GOOD MEAT QUALITY OF THE ANIMALS.«

Manuel Winter

more energy which they can use to develop a rich and deeper root system.

In dry periods, the plants will grow undisturbed and provide shade to the soil, thereby improving the microclimate, promoting soil life and contributing to saving water.

The high stocking density is the other aspect that makes the system work. When many animals graze a small field, they eat all the tops of the nutrient-rich stand and trample on the remaining growth. Mob grazing is about stocking densities of at least 100,000kg liveweight per hectare. This figure refers to small fields. As these are usually grazed for only a few hours, the high stocking density is no problem. The mulch layer that is created by the animals trampling on the plants protects the soil against erosion and drying up, which is a major advantage in dry regions. This type of livestock farming is comparable to growing cover crops in arable farming.

Which aspects should be taken into account when using this grazing strategy?

Winter: Using the proper grass species is particularly important in this special grazing system: the mix must be species-rich and the species must develop deep roots. Normally, perennial ryegrass is one of the typical grass species being used. Drawback of this grass for mob grazing though is that it doesn't develop really deep roots. By comparison, species such as lucerne, timothy, cocksfoot and other

top grasses that develop deep roots are more beneficial for this system. In addition, as each species has its specific root architecture, the various species in the mix complement each other to the overall effect of improving the water supply.

How much time and labour are required for running a mob grazing system and how can farmers find out whether their farm is suitable for mob grazing?

Winter: Mob grazing is suitable for extensive livestock farming systems. The system is based on large pasture fields rather than a high animal performance. The animals are beef cattle or cows with pasture genetics.

At a first glance, mob grazing seems to be more labour-intensive than other grazing systems, because the animals are frequently moved to another field. They graze the same pasture only two or three times a year. Yet, as daily checks are carried out anyway they can be done when the herd is moved. In addition, certain technical aids such as fence lifters can help reduce the workload. The extra time input is about 30 minutes every day.

Which conclusions do you draw from your research and which advice can you give our readers to take away?

Winter: One conclusion in my master's thesis is that from all the mixes tested, the species-rich ones containing grasses, legumes and

herbs at specific percentages led to higher yields.

The daily weight gains were higher, too. This may also have been attributed to the COUNTRY Energy MultiLife mix which contains drought tolerant herbs. In general, the initial experience with mob grazing has been very satisfactory. What is important for this grazing system – just like for favourable field conditions – is to match the grazing system to the field stand.

This special grazing strategy places greater emphasis on the stand and the soil, promotes biodiversity and can be a successful strategy in dry areas. This is especially important in today's world where biodiversity should be given greater attention while maintaining the productivity.

In my opinion, it's important to think outside the box and learn from others when their systems work well. It also takes a certain amount of courage and willingness to take risks, because you can never be sure whether a new approach will bring the desired results.

Thank you very much for the interview!

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