

Targeted Grazing Need To Know Guide

The On Site Evaluation (Part II):

The Contractor

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Introduction

In the first part of this series on the application of targeted grazing, I looked at the issues that the client needs to address for their project to run more efficiently. In the second part, I want to flip the coin and talk to the contractor. By this, I mean anyone who has, or is starting, their own targeted grazing service. Regardless of livestock species or geographic region, there are a few lessons related to me by those already in the business that might help make your endeavor easier.

Building a Business

There seems to be this strange misconception that setting up a contracting business means simply getting some animals, buying some electric fence, waiting for the phone to ring and watching the money roll in. Nothing could be further from the truth. Livestock are unpredictable, they never shut off, their welfare comes before money and, if managed improperly, livestock are capable of serious harm. It's important to develop a business plan that fits your schedule, resources and energy or it may lead to frustration and improper management decisions.

To begin, you need a business plan. To make a plan, you need a starting point and an ending point (A to B). The ending point will be your goal or the long-term vision of your business. There are about as many types of grazing services as there are ways to graze livestock. Some examples are:

- Livestock species specific,
- Target vegetation specific (i.e. – only working on leafy spurge or brush control),
- Local v. Regional,
- Part-time v. Full-time or
- Client specific (i.e. – only working for state agencies).

The starting point consists of:

1. What you have that you can use, such as:
 - a. Livestock.
 - b. Experience with your intended livestock species.
 - c. Plant knowledge.
 - d. Noxious weed knowledge.
 - e. Any private, local, state or federal contacts you know. These people are going to be your potential client base.
 - f. Perhaps you just happen to have some random temporary electric fence somewhere.
2. Your obstacles. There are many potential obstacles, but most of it comes down to how much time and money you have to commit to this business. Running livestock involves too much work for you to end up with a company that doesn't fit your schedule or budget.
3. Your needs. This can be broken down into two aspects. What you need to start with based on what you have and what you need to maintain the business you ultimately want. Knowing both, you can develop a plan over time that will allow you to get from one to the other. Because if you want a large business and you start at that level, it's going to be expensive and very difficult to manage. Some of your needs will include:
 - a. Livestock species/breed. And make sure it's a species and breed that suits the areas where you want to work.
 - b. Animal numbers.
 - c. Labor. How many herders? Will they provide their own dogs? Will you need an accountant to keep track of expenses, income, taxes, etc.? A

business manager to field phone calls, set up appointments and schedule contracts? If you're planning on a regional service, this may be necessary.

- d. Equipment. This may include:
 - i. Temporary Electronet or some other kind of portable fencing.
 - ii. Portable fence energizers/chargers and ground rods.
 - iii. Campers for lodging.
 - iv. Horse trailers.
 - v. Herding animals,
 - vi. Guarding animals,
 - vii. Supplement,
 - viii. Tools,
 - ix. Corral supplies,
 - x. Veterinary supplies
 - xi. Basic animal husbandry supplies.
 - xii. Breeding supplies. If you need bred animals for a project, what about adequate breeding facilities on site? How will you deal with bum babies (orphans)? Castration? Weaning?
- e. Insurance. This includes liability insurance, which is essential to your business, health coverage for your employees and worker's compensation.
- f. A home base for use during down time.

Once you've determined these things, it will help you decide 1) If your original goal is feasible and how to adjust it to fit your needs 2) where you'll need to start and 3) how you will need to proceed in order to reach your goal.

Set the Ground Rules

Unless you plan on taking any project and doing whatever it takes to run that project, these rules are something you will need. Some examples of ground rules might be:

- Water and how it will be provided to the animals.
- Payment schedule.

- Site access. Do you want the truck/trailer to be able to drive into the site and turn around or are you willing to walk the animals into the site?
- Urban sites. Yes or no.
- Animal health disclaimer. The right to remove the animals if there is anything you consider to be a serious risk to their health and safety.

Defining these ground rules during the site evaluation will allow you and the client to 1) decide if the project is appropriate for your service and 2) establish your needs well in advance. This saves everyone a lot of time, makes you look a lot more professional and allows everyone to focus on the most important aspect of the project; the vegetation management.

Training

When you're finally ready to purchase animals, unless you buy them from a targeted grazing professional, they will need to be trained. In order for them to do their job to the best of their ability, they need to be exposed to electric fence, the target vegetation, herding, moving, trucking, strange noises and people milling about. Exposure to all of these things means lower stress for the animals once they get to a contract site. The less stress imposed upon the animal, the better they will do their job. And this includes making your life easier by not looking for other sources of feed besides the target vegetation you're being paid to graze, not spooking so easily, not dying on the truck and not escaping the fence as often.

You must also train yourself. You'll have to use both your gut and your brain. And it's something for which you need to prepare. Learn about:

- The livestock. The health of the animals must come first and they never shut off, so make sure to learn about the husbandry of that animal. Their:
 - Vaccination requirements.
 - Supplement needs.
 - Grooming.
 - Breeding.

- Nutrition.
- Vulnerability to differing climates. Not all animals were made for all weather.
- Vulnerability to toxins.
- Utilization levels, ocular assessments, monitoring and soils.
- The desired and undesired plants in your chosen area.
- Poisonous plants and how to recognize them.
- Electric fences, horse trailers, loading, corrals and herding.
- Guard animals and herding dogs.
- Your individual animals. No one should know those animals better than you. As a species, they have certain behavioral and physiological traits, but each herd/flock and individual is different. This is important because eventually, they will be the ones to tell you when it's time to move, when they're not healthy and when they're content.

On the Job Site

By the time you get to working with the client, you should have a strong idea of what you need in order to set up, implement and complete that project. For the evaluation and implementation, I would only have a few words of advice to add:

1. Make sure both you and the client understand the project goals.
2. Go through all of the information listed in the first part of this series. These aspects of the project and site are important for you to know.
3. Don't forget your disaster plan. The one constant in this business is that both nature and livestock are nothing if not unpredictable.
4. Communicate.
5. Be flexible and ready for change.
6. Know your animals and your plants.
7. Don't make promises you can't keep. Taking on projects that you're not equipped to handle not only gives you a bad reputation, but targeted grazing as well.

Good Luck and Expect Change

My only other piece of advice would be to expect change and embrace it. Your goals will change, as will your management of the animals. As you begin to see the progress of your business or projects unfold, adjustments in management will have to be made. But it's essential to have that initial starting point and plan because it's the foundation on which those adjustments will be made. Otherwise, good luck and good grazing.