**Habitat Happenings**

**Wetland Grazing – Good for Cows, Good for Wetlands**

Grazing wetlands can promote quality habitat conditions and increase available forage for area producers. Different grazing regimes can be implemented to manage against invasive species and promote desired communities. Depending on the goals, timing, intensity, and duration of grazing can be implemented. In combination these factors can be used to alter vegetation composition and structure as well as increase bare ground, mudflats, and open water. Grazing plans can be used to achieve these management goals by providing a flexible framework outlining timing, frequency, and grazing intensity.

The first step in a grazing plan is to define the objective. This helps define the necessary grazing timeframe. This is focused on growing dates of the target species as well as the number of cattle available to graze the site. For example, if your objective is to reduce invasive species (i.e. reed canary grass, cattail, bullrush), season-long grazing may be required to hinder plant development. Estimated carrying capacity or stocking rates will be dependent on expected aboveground plant growth. Monitoring by University of Nebraska – Lincoln extension suggest an average of 9,000 lbs./acre of above ground production by invasive wetland plant communities. High stocking rates (two cow calf pairs per acre) can reduce tillering or expansion through root growth because of intense hoof action. High stocking rates also reduce seed production. When there are not enough animals to achieve the desired stocking rate, temporary cross fences can be used to subdivide the wetland into smaller paddocks thus achieving the desired grazing intensity. Grazing should begin as soon as the plants start to emerge in early spring to maintain animal health as plants are most palatable at this time. Heavy stocking can maintain the vegetation in an early growth stage that will provide maximum nutrition for the cattle. For some species, this can be mid-March or early-April.

Other grazing strategies can be tailored to maintaining a desired wetland plant community that has little or no invasive species. For example, in wetlands that have a mix of native and invasive species, it may be necessary to graze twice per season. Grazing early in the growing season, resting the wetland during the growth of desirable vegetation such as annual plants, and then grazing during late summer when invasives are actively growing again. If the goal is to promote more open water, bare ground, and annual plants, spring and early-summer grazing is preferred. Cessation of grazing by mid-summer, usually no later than August 10, will allow the growth of annual plant species that produce a large volume of seeds that are an important source of food for wildlife.

Grazing infrastructure like perimeter fences, cross fence, and livestock watering facilities (i.e. solar wells tanks to provide clean water) allows producers to more effectively graze these sites. Portable tub, chute, and alley systems are available from local Natural Resource Districts to allow producers to use stock trailers or semis to transport cattle to wetlands. These systems also allow producers to work their animals at the site if any animal health issues arise.

*The Rainwater Basin Joint Venture helps landowners with the cost of infrastructure needs as well as connecting cooperators with landowners seeking grazing tenants via the cattle grazers network located on the web at* [*https://www.rwbjv.org/rainwater-basin-programs/cattle-grazers-network/*](https://www.rwbjv.org/rainwater-basin-programs/cattle-grazers-network/)*. If you are interested in grazing, or finding a cooperator to graze your wetland, please visit the website.*