



Block Management

Low-moisture blocks are helping some ranchers improve grazing distribution through some tough times. “Dry years make you try new things,” says rancher David Voldseth, Lennep, MT.

Still, that wasn’t enough, so Voldseth and the other permittees had to reduce livestock numbers and duration of grazing on their allotments. Until recently, that is. This year, Comb Butte graziers were allowed another week of grazing because of better cattle distribution on the allotment.

“A week longer on the allotment means a lot this time of year,” Voldseth says.

On Comb Butte, the block of choice is Crystalyx® low-moisture blocks. There are other similar blocks made and distributed throughout the country by several feed and animal supplement manufacturers.

Skeptics turn believers

Forest Service range conservationist Wayne Butts, Harlowton, MT, approves of what he sees at Comb Butte and in other allotments. At first he was skeptical. After seeing the system in action, he thinks the idea can be used effectively in an overall management plan. He stresses that the system is just a tool, “not a silver bullet.”

A lot of the tension he sees between ranchers and recreational users in the forest centers on the use and condition of the creek bottoms. Both parties, he says, use the riparian areas of the Lewis and Clark Forest very heavily.

“With the use of this supplement, the permittees bought themselves 10-20 days extra grazing on the permit (in 2003) when used in conjunction with riding,” Butts says. When used in combination with herding, they really do a good job in getting cattle off the creek bottoms.”

Low-moisture blocks (125- to 250-lb. barrels) are the supplement form preferred by the Comb Butte permittees because of the steep terrain and distances cattle and cattle managers have to cover in the allotment.

Derek Bailey, Havre, MT, a Montana State University range scientist, has spent a decade examining

Strategic supplementation can lure cattle to areas they otherwise would not graze, maximizing forage utilization.

By **Clint Peck**
Senior Editor

Like people, cows have their comfort zones. In western rangelands, getting cows to leave the comforts of green, cool riparian areas to graze the drier, steeper mountainsides and ridges has always been a challenge. But, several years of drought have prompted some Montana ranchers to dig deeper in their bag of grazing management tricks in an effort to increase cattle comfort.

“We’re now using low-moisture protein blocks to draw cattle to grass in

places that they wouldn’t otherwise find,” says David Voldseth, of Lennep, MT. “It’s the best way that we’ve found to keep a good scatter on the cows.”

The Voldseth family, along with two other permittees, graze cattle on the rugged Comb Butte Allotment in the Lewis and Clark National Forest of central Montana. On Comb Butte, there’s plenty of forage, even in dry years, to sustain the roughly 600 cow-calf pairs intended for the allotment.

Voldseth and the other permittees have spent thousands of dollars developing water systems to improve cattle distribution. They also used the old practice of locating salt on the higher ground.



David Voldseth

cattle distribution and grazing behavior. He believes in using self-feeding, low-moisture blocks as a lure for cattle to graze rugged upland terrain.

“Once cattle find them, the blocks have a unique ability to hold them in the rugged areas,” Bailey says. “There’s no question such blocks improve both pasture and animal production efficiency.”

For example, in a study conducted in the Bear’s Paw Mountains near Havre, Bailey and his colleagues observed 32% of the herd grazing the rugged upland areas near supplement blocks and salt. But, just 3% of the cows were observed working similar areas that contained only salt.

Pretty cheap grazing

Bailey has been tracking animal movement and grazing behavior using collars fitted with global positioning system (GPS) technology. He’s found low-moisture blocks are a stronger attractant than water to cattle during fall and winter grazing. Cows spent more time within 200-600 yds. of low-moisture blocks than within similar distances to water.

“This contradicts the notion that water is the most powerful attraction to move cattle in the fall and winter,” Bailey says. But, summer or winter, the influence of the low-moisture blocks rapidly declines beyond about 600 yds. Supplement should not be expected to lure cattle to areas beyond 600-700 yds. from the site of placement.

What’s the cost of this strategy? About \$4/animal unit month (AUM), estimates Voldseth, which nearly triples the \$1.43/AUM permittees pay government to graze public domain.

“That includes about \$2 for the product and about \$2 in labor necessary to get the cattle to use it,” he says. “It’s still pretty cheap grazing when you consider everything that’s involved and everything that we have to gain over the long haul in doing a better job of grazing the allotment.”

Voldseth emphasizes though that as the price of grazing increases, say on private land where rates could be valued as high as \$30/AUM, the payoff of better forage utilization using this kind of practice becomes a real no-brainer. In fact, he used the low-moisture blocks as a fall grazing management tool on 3,000 acres of private grazing land for six years before getting the go-ahead to use it on the forest permit.

“It takes the cattle a couple of weeks to develop a taste for the blocks,” he explains. “But, once the animals find the blocks and become accustomed to them, getting cattle to go

back to them is not a problem.”

Bailey’s research also shows consumption patterns are fairly consistent among cattle using the low-moisture blocks. He suggests ranchers first introduce cattle to the supplement near a water source. Then, as the cattle utilize the forage around the supplement, the rancher can continue to move the blocks away from the water to the rougher terrain.

Voldseth says that in past years (“pre-block”), his cowboys would try to drift cattle to the grassy ridges in an effort to keep them away from the creek bottoms.

“Most of the time the cows would beat the riders back to the bottom,” he says. “All things considered, this system works about as well as anything we’ve tried to get better use of the upland ranges.”

Summer herding is key

Dennis Froeming, Bozeman, MT, has seen a lot of gimmicks in his career as a range conservationist. The range consultant admits he’s surprised by what he’s seen in using low-moisture blocks to manage range resources.

His analysis shows that in one case the practice yielded forage utilization rates of 25% near the block site, and 21% at $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ mile away from the site. This is compared to nearly zero utilization without the combination of blocks and herding.

“The blocks give cattle an incentive to stay away from water,” he says. “But, I don’t think you can separate riding from the use of the product during the summer when it is hot.”

In a recently completed study at the Bair Ranch, Martinsdale, MT, Bailey also found that forage stubble heights near streams in pastures where strategic supplementation was integrated with riding were 2 in. higher than in control pastures where cow-calf pairs were allowed to roam freely.

On public lands where stubble heights are often used as grazing standards, such a reduction in riparian zone grazing could mean the difference between staying on the allotment and taking the cattle home early and purchasing alternative forage.

In a separate study conducted by Bailey at the Ross Ranch and Thackeray Ranch in the Bear’s Paw Mountains of north-central Montana, placement of low-moisture blocks on rugged uplands reduced the time cow-calf pairs spent within 50 yds. of streams during the summer without herding.

“Strategic supplement placement without riding is most effective during the fall and winter,” Bailey says. “But low-moisture blocks are another tool for improving cattle grazing patterns during the summer as well.” ■


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