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Grazing-Induced Modifications to Peak Standing Crop in Northern Mixed-Grass Prairie

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Abstract

Selective grazing can modify the productive capacity of rangelands by reducing competitiveness of productive, palatable species and increasing the composition of more grazing-resistant species. A grazing system (season-long and short-duration rotational grazing) × stocking rate (light: 16 steers · 80 ha⁻¹, moderate: 4 steers · 12 ha⁻¹, and heavy: 4 steers · 9 ha⁻¹) study was initiated in 1982 on northern mixed-grass prairie. Here, we report on the final 16 years of this study (1991–2006). Spring (April + May + June) precipitation explained at least 54% of the variation in peak standing crop. The percentage of variation explained by spring precipitation was similar between stocking rates with short-duration grazing but decreased with increasing stocking rate for season-long grazing. April precipitation explained the greatest percentage of the variation in peak standing crop for the light stocking rate (45%), May precipitation for the moderate stocking rate (49%), and June precipitation for the heavy stocking rate (34%). Peak standing crop was 23%–29% greater with light (1 495 ± 66 kg · ha⁻¹, mean ± 1 SE) compared to moderate (1 218 ± 64 kg · ha⁻¹) and heavy (1 156 ± 56 kg · ha⁻¹) stocking rates, which did not differ. Differences in peak standing crop among stocking rates occurred during average and wet but not dry springs. Neither the interaction of grazing system and stocking rate nor grazing system alone affected standing crop across all years or dry, average, or wet springs. Grazing-induced modification of productive capacity in this northern mixed-grass prairie is attributed to changes in species composition with increasing stocking rate as the less productive, warm-season shortgrass blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis* [H.B.K.] Lag. ex Griffiths) increases at the expense of more productive, cool-season midheight grasses. Land managers may need to substantially modify management to offset these losses in productive capacity.

Resumen

El apacentamiento selectivo puede modificar la capacidad productiva de los pastizales al reducir la competitividad de las especies productivas y apetecibles e incrementar la composición de especies más resistentes al apacentamiento. En 1982 se inició un estudio en las praderas de zacates mixtos del norte, en el que se evaluó un sistema de apacentamiento (continuo y rotacional de corta duración) en combinación con cargas animal (ligera 16 novillos · 80 ha⁻¹, moderado 4 novillos · 12 ha⁻¹, y alta 4 novillos · 9 ha⁻¹). Aquí, reportamos el final de este estudio de 16 años (1991–2006). La precipitación de primavera (abril + mayo + junio) explicó al menos 54% de la variación de la producción pico de la biomasa en pie. El porcentaje de variación explicado por la precipitación de primavera, fue similar entre cargas animal en el apacentamiento de corta duración, pero disminuyó al incrementar la carga animal en el sistema de apacentamiento continuo. La precipitación de abril explicó el mayor porcentaje de la variación del pico de producción de la biomasa en pie en la carga animal ligera (45%), la precipitación de mayo para la carga animal moderada (49%), y la de junio para la carga pesada (34%). El pico de la biomasa en pie fue 23%–29% mayor con la carga ligera (1 495 ± 66 kg · ha⁻¹, media ± 1 DE) en comparación con las cargas moderada (1 218 ± 64 kg · ha⁻¹) y alta (1 156 ± 56 kg · ha⁻¹), las cuales no fueron diferentes. En primaveras con lluvia promedio o superior a este, se registraron diferencias entre cargas animal en el pico de la biomasa en pie y lo que no ocurrió en las primaveras secas. Ni la interacción entre sistema de apacentamiento y carga animal, ni el sistema de apacentamiento solo afectó la biomasa a través de todos los años, o en las primaveras secas, promedio o húmedas. La modificación inducida por el apacentamiento en la capacidad productiva de esta pradera de zacates mixtos del norte, es atribuida a cambios en la composición de especies al incrementar la carga animal; ya que zacates menos productivos, como el zacate de verano “Blue grama” (*Bouteloua gracilis* [H.B.K.] Lag. ex Griffiths), aumentan a expensas de los zacates medianos de invierno más productivos. Los manejadores pueden necesitar modificar substancialmente el manejo para sobreponer estas pérdidas de la capacidad productiva.

Key Words: continuous grazing, grazing system, rotational grazing, short-duration grazing, spring precipitation, stocking rate

INTRODUCTION

At global (Lauenroth 1979), regional (Sala et al. 1988; Lauenroth et al. 1999), and individual site (Lauenroth and Sala 1992; Smart et al. 2007) scales, peak standing crop in semiarid rangelands is influenced largely by precipitation. Regression relationships have been developed for predicting peak standing crop from precipitation in many rangeland ecosystems (Milchunas et al. 1994; O'Connor et al. 2001;

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