A December 2015 Ag News and Views article titled “Review of grazing practices could benefit wildlife,” elicited several inquiries for more details about grazing management for wildlife. This issue comes up often among wildlife managers and livestock producers with wildlife interests. The correct application of grazing management is not the same for every landowner, but there are common considerations.

A major consideration is how the property will be managed. This includes aesthetics. Most landowners’ aesthetic preference is a well-manicured pasture or a closed canopy forest. From a plant community standpoint, each is relatively simplistic. One favors livestock and a few species of wildlife; the other favors some species of wildlife. If the landowner considers wildlife and livestock as equally important, neither of these aesthetic preferences will be productive. Landowners with wildlife and livestock goals should realize that when managed well, the landscape will look messy.

The next consideration begins to demonstrate the dynamics involved with managing grazing for wildlife and livestock. The plant community should consist of native plants, comprised of a diversity of grasses, forbs and woody plants interspersed across the landscape and having different structure (size, growth form, physical maturity, etc.). It is very important that a land manager be able to identify and know how to manage the abundance and distribution of the most common native trees, shrubs, grasses and forbs on the property. The plant community on the landscape will look messy when plant species and structure are diverse with good interspersion. This provides wildlife year-round food, cover for nesting, and protection from predation and adverse weather. Additionally, it provides livestock with forage and cover and reduces the need for hay.

Livestock stocking rate is another consideration. Too often, the annual stocking rate exceeds carrying capacity. This is a critical mistake that can be easily avoided. Each property has a limited number of animals it can support annually. Stocking livestock in excess of this limit removes too
much forage, which eliminates wildlife habitat and livestock forage and reduces livestock performance and profitability. The correct stocking rate varies for every property depending on soils, topography, precipitation and plant communities. Furthermore, it is dynamic due to annual and seasonal fluctuations in weather such as drought. Therefore, a light to moderate annual stocking rate helps ensure an adequate volume of plants for wildlife habitat needs, optimal livestock performance and a source of fuel for using prescribed fire.

Grazing management for wildlife and livestock is successful when a landowner uses light to moderate stocking rates within a messy-looking (diverse) landscape comprised of native plants that a landowner can identify and manage. Grazing systems can be continuous or rotational, and grazing can be applied seasonally or annually. All combinations of these options can be used successfully as long as wildlife and livestock needs are considered equally when making grazing management decisions and the system matches the landowner’s available time and management ability. The objective should be to manage for a native plant community that is diverse in plant species and structure with good interspersion. Accomplishing this involves dynamic processes, both in terms of annual and seasonal fluctuations in weather, and how or if each pasture or portion of the property is grazed. The key is learning how to apply duration and intensity of grazing, and rest from grazing to native plants during different times of the year to achieve desired outcomes.

It is important to note that grazing, prescribed fire, and rest from disturbance are the primary processes to use when managing native plant communities for wildlife and livestock. It is impossible to achieve optimal results for wildlife and livestock when applying only grazing to native plant communities. Stocking rate and season of grazing should be timed appropriately on portions of the property to allow residual forage to remain for cover and nesting habitat or for prescribed fire. Portions of the property should have a mixture of grazing, prescribed fire and rested areas. This creates diversity in plant species and structure across the landscape.

Establishing several paddocks on the property is one way to facilitate variations of disturbance. Differing grazing intensities and timing of grazing can be applied to different paddocks during one year then changed during the next and the next to manage for diverse plant structure and composition. Rest from disturbance can also
be applied depending on the desired plant community needed to complement the overall plant community goal. Unless the same timing and grazing intensity needs to be repeated over time to create a desired plant community, strive to alter how and when each paddock is grazed to create greater plant composition and structure.

Using the entire property as one paddock and applying seasonal or season-long grazing along with patches of prescribed fire is another way of creating varying levels of disturbance across the landscape. This is called “patch-burn grazing.” When continuous grazing with light stocking rates, livestock tend to overgraze some areas and not graze or very lightly graze others. Prescribed fire can be applied to portions of the underutilized areas. Livestock concentrate on recently burned areas, leaving other areas underutilized, of which portions can be burned the following year. The result is a mosaic of heavily, moderately and lightly grazed areas that change annually, which creates a native plant community diverse in plant species composition and structure.

Ultimately, when applying grazing for wildlife and livestock, the objective is to vary the intensity and timing of grazing on as many different areas as possible. Without records, this is difficult to keep track of over time. Keeping records and using them to evaluate past and plan future grazing strategies is important. Records can be as simple as using photo points combined with basic grazing records or as complicated as collecting data from plant transects combined with detailed grazing and weather records. Regularly monitoring and evaluating grazing records, changes in the plant community on various locations, and livestock performance helps guide future management decisions needed for creating or maintaining a beneficial native plant community for wildlife and livestock.