Grazing land managers who graze multiple livestock species in the same animal groups or on the same acres of land see ecological as well as economic benefits that could improve the sustainability of their operations. Multispecies grazing can be used to more effectively utilize all of the browse and forage in pastures, target weeds and brush, and reduce parasite loads across pastures. These benefits could also lead to increased revenues or decreased costs.

Regardless, using multiple species to capture these benefits is not always sunny days. Including additional species on the ranch will add layers of management and an additional set of challenges. Grazing land managers who have effectively implemented multispecies grazing were briefly interviewed and asked to list the most difficult challenges they face. These managers operate grazing land in southern Oklahoma, northern Texas and the Edwards Plateau area in south-central Texas. They identified fencing needs, predator issues, working facilities and veterinary care as the top challenges that grazing land managers will face when implementing multispecies grazing.

What to Consider Before Adopting Multispecies Grazing

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Top identified challenges for multispecies grazing:

**FENCING NEEDS**

Beef cattle operation managers who plan on adding other species and have five-wire barbwire fencing will have a challenge keeping sheep or goats in areas intended. Many managers have success in upgrading their fences with the addition of a few strands of hot-wire, while others require the conversion of barbwire to net-wire fencing to hold back goats. This is especially true for exterior fencing. Areas with high densities of browse seem to be more conducive to adding hot-wire to existing fence, while areas with sparse stands of browse and few forbs might require net-wire fencing. Not only will this add varying levels of labor, but it will also add expense to prepare the ranch for the new management technique. Grazing land managers will have to weigh the benefits they will receive from multispecies grazing with the costs of time and money to modify existing fencing before the decision is made to adopt this practice. Sheep could require less fence modification than goats, but sheep may or may not meet the manager’s goals especially when it comes to brush suppression.

**WORKING FACILITIES**

The cattle working facilities most ranches have in place are usually not adapted to working smaller animals such as sheep or goats. Gaps between rails in the panels could be too wide, and the alley widths usually allow animals to turn around easily. This makes moving the animals through the working pens difficult. A separate set of pens might be needed to facilitate working sheep and goats. The methods and pharmaceuticals needed to work these animals are different from cattle and will add to the learning curve for managers who are new to smaller animals. Many feel that sheep and goats require more labor to care for. Many times sheep and goats will need their hooves trimmed because they will not wear down. This is very labor intensive and is an example of a management practice that is normally not needed in beef cattle production.

**PREDATOR ISSUES**

Predation can be a major issue for sheep and goat producers in many areas of the Southern Great Plains. Managers use donkeys, llamas or guard dogs to protect herds. A good guard dog seems to be the most effective at keeping predators at bay. The breed of guard dog could be a personal preference as it seems there are good individuals from each breed that have been developed to guard smaller animals like sheep and goats. Having multiple dogs could be key as it may be trial and error to discover which individual dog will be most conducive for different management styles and needs. Many producers use mobile dog sheds for their guard dogs’ care. Regardless of the guard animal type utilized, predator management is an added cost and an additional management skill that grazing land managers must develop when adding multispecies grazing to a ranch plan.

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Top identified challenges for multispecies grazing:

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VETERINARY CARE
Finding a veterinarian who has experience with sheep or goats could be an issue in certain areas. These animals have different diseases, parasites and other health issues to deal with than cattle. Veterinarians who practice in areas with predominantly beef production might have the same learning curve as the grazing managers new to sheep and goat production.

These are just a few of the issues that come along with adding multiple species to a grazing operation. As with any other decision managers make in their operations, the benefits must be weighed against the costs and challenges to ensure that multispecies grazing is a practice that meets the goals, management style and skill set of the manager. It seems more and more producers are finding that increased grazing animal biodiversity results in enough benefits to overcome the costs and challenges associated with incorporating multiple species. The most beneficial tool to help in transitioning to this grazing type is visiting with neighbors who’ve already worked through these challenges to see what has worked for them.