

# MICHIGAN GRAZIER NETWORKS, AN EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH OF THE MICHIGAN HAY AND GRAZING COUNCIL

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this educational program was to create a farmer to farmer learning process which would facilitate educational programming in grazing land management for new and intermediate experienced graziers in Michigan. An evaluation of the 1995 educational experiences of program participants was conducted in December, 1995, utilizing an assessment program called Optionfinder.

## KEYWORDS

Graziers, grazing networks, Optionfinder, educational experiences, evaluation

## INTRODUCTION

There has been significant interest by Michigan dairy, beef, and sheep producers in grazing land management based upon farmer attendance at grazing land management educational meetings in Michigan and requests to extension agents for information on grazing management. With increasing farmer interest in grazing land management, Michigan State University Extension in cooperation with the Michigan Hay and Forage Council began organizing educational efforts dealing with grazing land management. In 1994, the Michigan Hay and Grazing Council secured a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to establish a "Grass Roots Graziers Network in Michigan". The Michigan Hay and Forage Council then approved a name change to the Michigan Hay and Grazing Council to express a new commitment to educational experiences in grazing land management as well as traditional hay and forage programs. The council proceeded to contract a coordinator to assist in establishing local grazer and forage groups, publish a quarterly newsletter, and assist in evaluation of the Michigan Grazer Network educational program.

## METHODS

In March, 1995, a workshop was conducted to train leaders in organizing local grazer networks which resulted in nine volunteer leaders. Attendees at the Annual Michigan Grazing Conferences were given opportunities to view where local network leaders were located in the state and become a member. Each local network leader identified people to help facilitate group meetings, conferences, pasture walks and other experiences. Since the initiation of the project, there are now 17 active networks in the state. There were 65 formal and non-formal educational events which took place in 1995. An evaluation of the above group learning experiences of program participants was conducted in December 1995, utilizing an assessment program called Optionfinder.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Over one hundred grazing network participants gathered at one of eight sessions and used an electronic decision support system, Optionfinder, to respond to a series of questions about their local networks. Optionfinder lets participants respond to questions anonymously, and virtually instantaneously by transmitting responses via remote control keypads to a central computer. The collected responses are projected onto a screen for group discussion as soon

as each question is answered. In one hour, each group answered over eighty questions about their local network activities. The local networks judged having an opportunity to share as the most important reason for coming together. Acquire increased technical proficiency was the second most selected reason. The third and fourth most often selected reasons for belonging were research needs and validating their practice. Participants rated Grass Management as the topic about which they learned the most. Interesting enough, when asked about future topics to be emphasized, Grass Management was the most preferred. The local groups acquired information on grazing land management in a variety of ways ranging from grazer to grazer discussions, pasture walks, publications and conferences. Talking with other graziers was rated the highest in five of the eight meetings and rated the highest overall on a per person basis. The groups allocated credit for initiating and maintaining the local networks. Every group rated farmers the highest followed by Michigan State University Extension and the Michigan Hay and Grazing Council. Considerably lower was the Natural Resource and Conservation Service and the Soil Conservation Districts. Each group was asked about participation in the future convening of their groups. They were asked to indicate the preferential level of participation of twelve possible organizations. Michigan State University Extension was chosen first by each of the eight groups. Participants were also asked about the impact of managed rotational grazing practices on their lives. Forty-four percent indicated that managed rotational grazing had made their lives much better, which was just slightly higher than the forty-one percent for whom life was just a little better. Attempting to ascertain why life was better using managed rotational grazing proved to be more difficult. A combination of profit, better time management and a more interesting system was selected by forty-one percent. Finally participants were asked about the likelihood of whether local grazing networks were sustainable over the long term, particularly if they had to rely on their own resources, be it time and or money. Over sixty-five percent of the participants felt that most, if not all, of the members would sustain the on-going Grazing Network. Only twenty-one percent felt that only a minority of participants would maintain support and only three percent felt that the local networks would end once the grant support terminated. Over half those polled felt that a combination of dues and time were reasonable contributions to expect from farmers and eighty-eight percent affirmed their own personal willingness to maintain the groups.

