Introduction to Mob Grazing Implementation

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Introduction

Mob grazing is a regenerative grazing technique used by livestock farmers. Instead of conventionally set-stocking a field, where livestock are given a large area to graze for an extended period of time (often for many weeks or months), the mob (herd or flock) is given a relatively small area to graze for only a short period of time. This is a grazing technique that mimics natural grazing behaviour of wild herds, which restores many ecological processes. By working with nature and re-establishing these ecological processes, farmers and their livestock can realise many benefits.

The fundamentals of mob grazing

Long rest intervals between short grazing periods allows the pasture to fully recover, ensuring no pasture is overgrazed. When grazed, each field can be divided into smaller paddocks using temporary electric fence, if necessary. Typically, livestock are given a new paddock every 12 hours to every four days (grazing for longer than four days will start to inhibit regrowth). Rest intervals can be anywhere from around 21 days to 120 days, depending on the season. In this way, mob grazing seeks to mimic the natural grazing behaviour of wild herds of large herbivores, for a more sustainable, ecological, and often more productive, method of rearing livestock.

What are the benefits of mob grazing?

Mob grazing can provide many benefits to both the farmer and their livestock. Sufficient recovery periods between grazing rotations supports the growth of significantly more forage, providing more feed for livestock. More uniform grazing and trampling results in better pasture utilisation and ‘weed’ control. Rotations onto clean pasture helps to reduce foot infections and lameness, while grazing taller grass helps to reduce worm burdens. Increased plant health and biodiversity results in healthier livestock, as well as improving habitat quality which supporting increased biodiversity both above and below ground. A healthy soil structure and complex functioning soil biology leads to greater drought and flood resilience, as well as carbon and nitrogen sequestration.

By working with nature to optimise ecosystem processes that benefit both farming and the environment, mob grazing is an approach to livestock management that not only reduces labour and liability, but increases productivity and profitability as well.

Figure 1: An example of what mob grazing can look like. ***Left:*** *Grazing pass of 120 head of cattle (Aberdeen Angus X Holstein stores), given approximately 3.5 hectares for several days at the end of June – notice the grass as tall as the cattle!* ***Right:*** *Same paddock, 29 days later, regrowing evenly from an even pasture utilisation.*

Implementing mob grazing for the first time with sheep and/or cattle

Step 1. Prepare to begin mob grazing by dividing a field up with temporary electric fence. Aim to make the first paddock sustain the mob for around 4 days (Figure 2A). This allows the mob to learn what the electric fence is without feeling too hemmed in. The voltage needs to be hot, a minimum 8000 volts or else it won't work. Use 3 stands of electric fence in the beginning.

Combining all livestock into a single mob may not always be viable (due to breeding regimes, or deferential management of groups or species), but aiming for as fewer mobs as possible will make mob grazing significantly more efficient.

When mob grazing we don't want to graze everything: the most nutritious parts of the grass plant are the tips of the leaves, and the more leaf surface area we leave behind to photosynthesise the quicker the pasture will recover and the quicker the pasture can be grazed again. As a rule of thumb, aim to graze a third, trample a third and dung a third (the 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 rule).

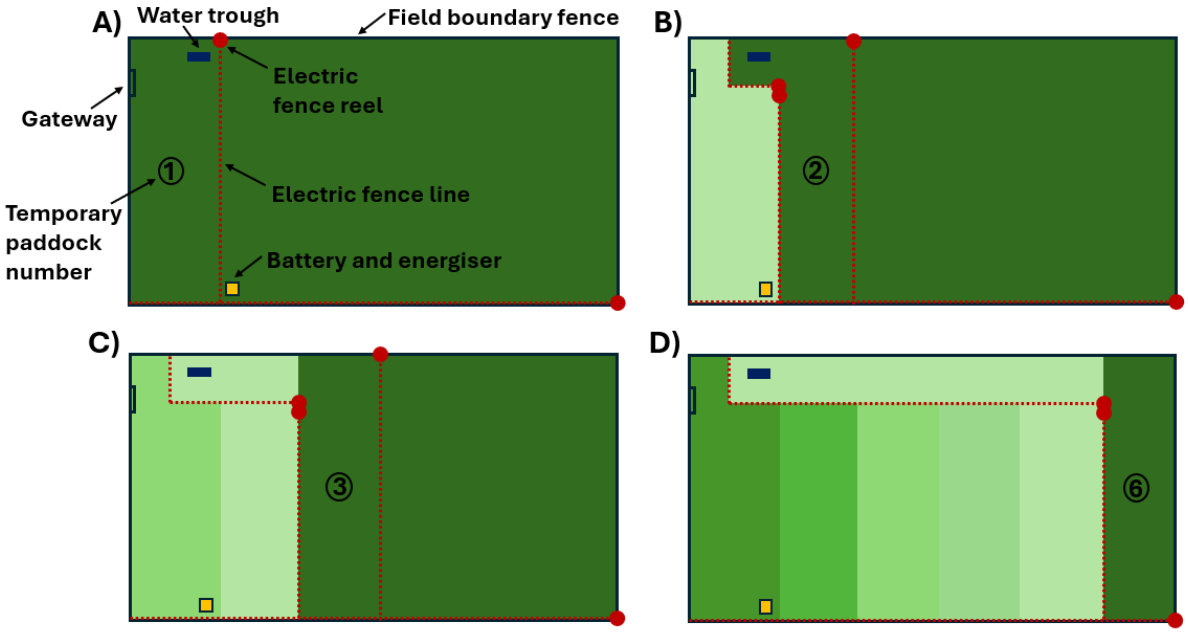

Figure 2: An example division of a typical field into smaller paddocks with temporary electric fence. A single strand of electric fence can be run along one side of the boundary stock fence, using insulators drilled into the fence posts, allowing a live wire for the interior electric fence line to connect to. With only a single water source, a green lane will need to be formed to access the entire field in multiple paddocks.

Step 2. When the mob has grazed a 1/3 or the grazing duration has reached 4 days, whichever comes first, prepare another paddock using 3 strands of electric fence (Figure 2B). Move the mob into this new paddock.

Step 3. On the third paddock, remove a strand and start erecting the lines of electric fence using 2 strands.

For sheep: Remove the top strand. With two wires, have the bottom strand 9” above the ground, and the now top strand 15” off the ground. If sward height exceeds 9”, place the bottom strand as low as possible, just above the sward height.

For cattle: Remove the bottom strand. With two wires, have the top strand as high as you can such that you can walk over it without being electrocuted, and the bottom strand a few inches below the top.

For sheep and cattle: Remove the middle strand. With two wires, have the bottom strand 12” above the ground, and the top strand as high as you can such that you can walk over it without being electrocuted. If sward height exceeds 12”, place the bottom strand as low as possible, just above the sward height.

Step 4. Keep rotating through the paddocks, decreasing the grazing duration to 1 day. Grazing durations can be anywhere from 12 hours to 4 days to suit your goals and routines. Keeping the

routine consistent over long periods of time is important for the mob to trust you, respect the electric fence, and thrive.

Step 5. If grazing a single species, reduce the electric fence line to a single wire when you are ready. If grazing sheep and cattle together, two strands as detailed before will still be necessary.

For sheep: have the single strand 12” off the ground, or just above the sward height if the grass is tall.

For cattle: have the single strand as high as you can such that you can walk over it without being electrocuted.

Step 6. In the beginning, the 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 rule simplifies things and works well, however, with experience this rule can be adapted to account for factors like weather, season, livestock management, sward management.

Additional temporary and permanent mob grazing infrastructure

Though mob grazing can be successfully implemented in a typical field using only temporary electric fence, the investment into more mob grazing equipment and infrastructure can make the grazing system even more efficient, reducing labour and increasing output.

Beyond the fencing, the of the biggest restrictions to efficient mob grazing can be access to water. With only one access point to water, the grazing duration will be too long if the mob is not big enough to optimally graze the pasture in 4 days or less. Using temporary electric fence alone can allow the field to be divided up into smaller paddocks for mob grazing, however, a green lane will be necessary to allow livestock access to water, resulting in an area of the field over grazed and over trampled (Figure 2). In contrast, if multiple water points can be installed, then a green lane will not be necessary and the entirety of the field can be optimally mob grazed in sufficiently small temporary paddocks (Figure 3). These additional water points can be permanent water troughs, or they can be temporary in the form of a small plastic trough on the end of a long, mobile water pipe that can be moved by hand, or they can be from a water bowser that is moved with a vehicle. Having a permanent water trough in the centre of a field can be another option, allowing the field to be divided up into any number of segments with the mob rotating around the field in a circular direction.

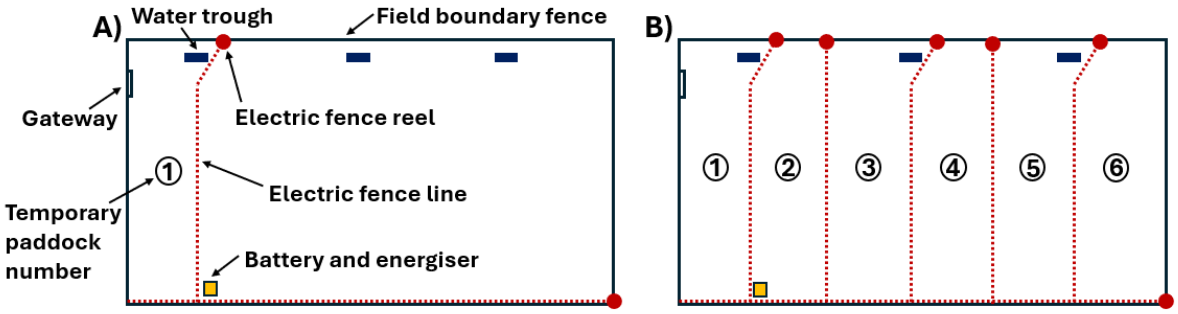

Figure 3: With additional water points, either through temporary or permanent troughs, the pasture can be grazed in multiple paddocks more efficiently, ensuring no area of pasture is exposed to livestock for too long.