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Some background on rotation planning & how we got to Tier 3

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To: Business OHA <business@orindahorsemen.org>

Hi all,

Since the Annual Meeting I've been trying to write up some notes to give folks more of the background on how we got to tier 3 and some of what we've tried with respect to spring grazing.

All the parameters for both tier 2 & tier 3 are noted on the rotation schedule and on the website. The discussion at our annual meeting revolved around the length of time we grazed each section in the spring.

1. We did not shorten Spring rotations in order to achieve tier 3. The difference between tier 2 & tier 3 at OHA was hay supplementation in the upper Sullivan during the Fall. Our Spring rotations were already short under tier 2 during the previous years.

EBMUD saw this - that we were virtually at tier 3 already - and suggested I devise a tier 3 plan; OHA members also encouraged me to make a schedule that included more stays in the upper Sullivan. In 2015-16 we shortened our stay in the Pond Pasture during the Fall by feeding hay in the upper Sullivan, and so achieved tier 3. The change between tier 2 & 3 was the length of time we fed in the Pond Pasture during the fall dormant season.

Rest periods - that is the length of uninterrupted time plants recover while they are not grazed - are the same for both tier 2 & 3, and are a limit on any changes. The tiers are an EBMUD incentive program that offers a lease discount for adopting good management practices. It's offered to all the range leases: 15% for tier 2, 30% for tier 3. In addition, EBMUD retains the right to dictate changes in our pasture stays; any adjustments that we want during the year are subject to their approval; and, they monitor pasture condition. Those are the ground rules.

2. We got on progressively shorter Spring rotations beginning in 2010-11 because it was clearly better - for both the horses and the pasture - to eat down the oat, rye and other annual grasses early in the season while the days were still cool. If we did not move more quickly through the sections, those grasses predominated at the height of the season (when the annuals are most likely to cause grass founder & laminitis) at the expense of more beneficial perennial species, in the later pastures.

3. The past two years - 2016-17 and 2017-18 - have been particularly difficult for our horses because of unusually late spring rains and higher temperatures during the growing season. Late rains & higher temperature prolong the season for oat, rye, clover, and any risky forage. 2016-17 was 2nd wettest ever. Not a normal drought/wet cycle. Even though we had a dry spell in early 2018 and temperatures remained relatively cool until mid-April, late spring 2018 was suddenly problematic for lots of the horses.

4. We make two cycles through the pastures in the growing season, but this year we skip the Pond on both passes (returning there in July), go earlier in April to the upper Sullivan, and skip over the Lower on the second pass, returning there for the last week of June, to allow it to dry down, but grazing it soon enough to provide some fire protection. The move to the Pear Orchard is a little earlier than usual, thus avoiding Memorial Day; if necessary, we can prolong our stay in the Lower Sullivan & Beer Can 3-4 days to wait for grass in the Pear Orchard to dry down a bit more and still meet the requirements for tier 3 and get out of the Pear Orchard before the 4th of July.

5. I totally agree that it is better to keep the whole herd grazing together during the growing season if we can. For horses who need restricted grazing, grazing muzzles are an option; Tessa, Sassy & Cooper all benefited last year. For horses that have to come off pasture to diet, I hope we can keep them on daily grass so they can quickly & easily return to the herd, tag teaming with others. This takes some small group coordination, but can work well.
6. Everyone, especially those with easy keepers, should consider joining the unfed in January. I'm sort of old-fashioned about this, but I think staying on good grass forage from the beginning of the year helps a horse's gut tolerate the changing conditions during the growing season, plus, going with the unfed in January is one way to help the easy keepers stay reasonably trim into the growing season. If more horses join us in the Plateau during January - which they can do at any time during the month of January - there will be more grass, in addition to the hay supplementation, for those who really need it in the Lower. January in the Plateau is a transition time for your horse from winter hay supplementation to grass forage in the Pond pasture in February.
7. If people do have to pull their horses off the main pasture, especially in May when the weather heats up, we want to have EBMUD sanctioned places where they can go. We have such a plan, endorsed by last year's board and in effect last year; this year, we can include the Dairy as an option for about 4 horses for a week up until the end of the Plateau stay, May 11. This year I would like the membership and EBMUD to consider, once again, the suggestion that we could also use temporary enclosures in our pastures for dieting, convalescing, or other health reasons like possible exposure to EPM.
8. The number of in-hand moves are the same (or perhaps less) since EBMUD began their program of cross-fencing around 2003 - I think this was the beginning of Tier 2 at OHA (?) - because our overall time in the upper pastures and lower pastures has remained roughly the same. (My first OHA notes are from 2003, and my first memories of work parties are on the cross-fencing. I can still see Fred trudging up the fireroad carrying T-posts on his shoulder. Awesome.)
9. I first got involved in the rotation planning in 2009, at a time when EBMUD was very unhappy with OHA for so many members pulling horses off the pasture to diet in the stalls during the Spring. We had a long stay in the Pond Pasture at the height of the season those days, and my first suggestion was to shift the sequence around so that the herd would be in the upper drier pastures at that time. The results were pretty good, everybody was happier, but it became clear that we were not keeping pace with the fast growth of the annuals, so in subsequent years we started moving more quickly through the sections to try to keep them in check.

I understand the question: wouldn't it be better to keep the herd long enough in one section to really eat it down in May - at least in conditions of late rains & elevated temperature. I don't think the horses are benefited by a longer stay in the Plateau, but we do have the option of extending our stay a bit in both the LSR and Beer Can last half of May, if it looks like the horses will benefit - even under Tier 3. (Members suggested this in 2017 & we did implement a last minute approximate version.)

10. Another change I suggested in 2009 was to split the herd into "fed" and "unfed" groups during part of the hay feeding months. Feeding was a contentious issue in our membership at the time, so it seemed a good idea to allow different needs to be met now that OHA had more pasture sections. Accustoming the herd to split groups has allowed us to meet other kinds of different needs, and proved to be our best tool during the worst drought months in later years - something we also have to be prepared for in future.

So, that's some of the tool kit, and some of the history.

Best,
Erica