



**SIERRA
CLUB**

IOWA CHAPTER

Policy Discussion on Grazing

The Iowa Chapter supports policies that promote rotational grazing on private land.

Rotational grazing is a practice where grazing land is divided into segments called paddocks, with the grazing animals (cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, turkeys) moved from paddock to paddock every few days.



Photo by Francis Thicke

Rotational grazing has many advantages. The forage grasses, both introduced and native grasses and forbs, are allowed to rejuvenate while the paddock is resting between grazing periods. This results in less soil erosion. It also results in higher quality grasses and a greater output of grasses. Although labor is required to move the animals from paddock to paddock and to reconfigure fences and water sources for the move, the resulting grasslands are much healthier.¹

The Iowa Chapter supports prohibiting grazing on Conservation Reserve Program lands.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a federal government program where the government leases agricultural land for 10 to 15 years and requires it to be left unharvested. The fields are planted in perennials – prairie grasses. The purpose of the program is to prevent soil erosion, improve water quality, and create wildlife habitat.²

Highly erodible land is placed into the CRP program. Grazing on CRP erodible land subjects the land to soil erosion which results in lower water quality.

Further grazing destroys habitat for wildlife.

Ground-nesting birds use grasslands for nesting until about September 15.³ Many of the ground-nesting birds are in serious decline because of the loss of habitat for nesting. The habitat needs varies from species to species. For example, Henslow's sparrows need about three years of perennial growth to build up enough duff on the ground, to provide nesting materials and cover for the birds. On the other hand, meadowlarks need an unmowed area and will nest in ditches next to row crops.

¹ Allan Savory is a biologist studying grasslands, grazing methods, and desertification. His research supports rotational grazing to mimic the natural processes that occurred before European settlement. For more information, see [youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=vpTHi7O66pl#](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=vpTHi7O66pl#)

² fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=crp

³ Under CRP rules, the primary nesting season for Iowa is from May 15 to August 1. See fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/mapnesting062013.pdf

The prairie grasses that are planted on the CRP fields in Iowa provide habitat for beneficial insects such as pollinators.

Most of the Iowa cropland is planted in corn and soybeans without the use of cover crops. That land is subjected to soil loss and nutrient loss during the months that crops are not growing on the land. CRP lands can serve as a buffer to those fields, much more effectively if they have not been recently grazed.

Allowing grazing on CRP land requires some infrastructure – water tanks, pumps, fencing of paddocks, electricity for the water pump and electric fences if they are used, loading areas for moving animals via truck. That infrastructure undermines the reason for the CRP land and the concept of leaving the land fallow.

As commodity prices have increased, a significant amount of pasture acreage has been turned into fields of corn and soybeans. Likewise, high commodity prices have encouraged farmers to move their land from the CRP program and to use it for row crops. All of this means that there is less land for grazing. Consequently the farmers who are interested in grazing are eyeing the use of CRP land for grazing. The need for grazing land needs to be balanced with protecting erodible soils, keeping water bodies clean, and creating and protecting wildlife habitat. Consequently we are in dire need to keep the CRP lands in Iowa free of grazing. Although we are sympathetic, we do not support allowing CRP ground to be used for grazing.

Currently during dry weather emergencies or extended periods of heavy rain, the United States Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency may authorize farmers to graze on CRP land or mow the CRP fields.⁴

The Iowa Chapter does not support grazing on state park and recreation lands.

Because of the infrastructure needed for watering and fencing, the Iowa Chapter does not support using the state park and recreation lands for grazing.

The Iowa Chapter does not support harvesting hay from Conservation Reserve Program lands and road ditches.

Related to grazing on CRP land is allowing haying on the CRP ground. The Chapter is concerned about the loss of wildlife habitat when haying is allowed on CRP land. To complicate matters, the hay is most desirable during the time that the ground nesting birds are making nests, laying eggs, tending to the nest, and rearing their young.

After the nesting season, in September and October, the hay is less desirable to the farmers.

The Iowa Chapter does not support haying on CRP land. Likewise the chapter does not support harvesting of hay in road ditches.

⁴ fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=copr&topic=crp-eg