

# Determining Pasture Rental Rates

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Livestock producers and land owners want a simple and fair method to determine pasture rental rates. This tends to be a difficult question to answer because prices can vary from region to region due to market demand and supply.

Several methods are available for computing a pasture rental rate. However, before computing a pasture rental rate, producers and landowners need to understand a variety of factors influencing rental rates.

Pasture rental rates vary based on:

- Forage quantity and quality
- Forage species and composition – rangeland, improved pasture<sup>1</sup>, annual cover crop, crop residue
- Condition of fence
- Water quality and availability
- Management practices required by landowner
- Presence of a grazing system on rangeland and improved pastures
- Fertility practices on improved pastures
- Supply and demand

<sup>1</sup> Improved pastures usually refers to seeded pastures and may include tame grass species such as crested wheatgrass, brome grass, wheatgrass mixtures, and expired conservation reserve program lands in the northern Plains.

## Pasture Rental Rate Options

Many options are available to calculate pasture rental rates as a starting point for negotiations between a landowner and tenant. Because North Dakota is primarily a cow-calf producing state, the best rental rate options that fit our region are based on:

### Rental rate by acre

- Current market rates as provided by U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service-North Dakota, which conducts annual surveys
- Return on pasture investment - return based on value of land

### Rental rate by animal unit month (AUM)

- Rent per head of livestock (animal unit equivalent) per month

### Pasture quality factors

Pasture quality factors is a method recommended for annual forage pastures such as cover crops, crop residue and annuals planted used for grazing.

- Uses current market value for hay price per ton multiplied by pasture quality factor multiplied by animal unit equivalent
- This method will undervalue rangelands, especially with good cattle prices and lower hay values (for example, \$60/ton grass hay x 0.15 x 1.15 (1,200-pound cow with calf = \$10.35/AUM)

Pasture rental rates often are influenced by commodity prices such as commercial hay, corn, barley, byproducts and alternative land uses. Pasture rental rates need to be competitive with the production values of these crops that typically are fed to livestock as alternative feeds.

### Performance method

Performance method is an option used when payment is made based on livestock performance. This method is **not** recommended for permanent pasture types such as native rangeland or improved pastures grazed with cow-calf pairs in the Northern Plains. The performance method is calculated based on weight gain of livestock.

- Used primarily with yearling cattle
- Based on break-even rate for cost per pound of gain multiplied by pounds gained on pasture per head
  - The break-even rate for cost per pound of gain is extremely variable across a region and the country, thus leaving a wide range of potential rental rates. Publications throughout the country list a range of 30 to 60 cents as a break-even rate for cost per pound of gain (1, 2).

## Responsibilities

The responsibility of the tenant and landowner must be considered when negotiating rental rates. In most cases, unless specified in a written contract, the *tenant is responsible* for those activities related to livestock production and management. These activities include:

- Checking livestock
- Checking/maintaining water sources
- Providing salt, mineral and fly control
- Fence repair
  - Often negotiated between tenant and landowner
  - Material typically provided by landowner, but can vary from region to region

The *landowner typically is responsible* for those activities related to land production. These activities include:

- Fence
  - Responsibility for material and repair may vary and often is negotiated between landowner and tenant
- Water
- Weed and brush control
  - Negotiable, but landowner provides chemical
- Fertilizing and reseeded improved pasture
  - Negotiable, but landowner provides fertilizer and/or seed

## Landowner and Tenant Considerations

A *landowner* typically expects rental rates to cover the real estate taxes, cost of land maintenance (fence repair, water source costs, weed control/management, etc.), insurance and any interest on the investment if purchasing land. A landowner should be able to cover all out-of-pocket expenses from the rental payment; however, in some cases, this may be unrealistic due to current range and pasture values.

*Tenants* should determine their level of ability to rent a pasture based on current livestock market values, availability and costs of alternative feeds, and availability of other pastures within a reasonable distance. Basically, the tenant needs to know what he/she can afford based on his/her return per head or herd and projected annual budget.

# Renting by the Acre

Renting by the acre is the simplest option because it creates a direct payment rate for each acre of land grazed and is most familiar to livestock producers and landowners. However, this method has the greatest potential for economic losses by the tenant and poor land conservation efforts.

Leasing pasture by the acre sets a value on the land for the entire operating year (*based on North Dakota Century Code*) and usually is not tied to livestock numbers unless specified in a contract. This method usually benefits, economically, the tenant because he/she can add more livestock without increasing the payment.

This method also can increase the risk of overgrazing because adding more livestock doesn't add more expense to the tenant. Increased livestock numbers reduce the direct costs per head of livestock and potentially create overgrazed pastures if too many livestock are added during a period of time. The livestock producer may experience poor livestock performance and landowner resource degradation when overgrazing occurs.

**NOTE: The NDSU Range and Pasture Calculator may be used to calculate pasture rental rates. It can be accessed at [www.ag.ndsu.edu/sheets/range-and-pasture-calculator/](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/sheets/range-and-pasture-calculator/).**

## Current Market Rates: Survey Data

The USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service for North Dakota provides average pasture rental rates and range/pasture land values that are created based on annual surveys of farmers and ranchers. Approximately 1,700 North Dakota agricultural producers responded to the 2019 survey.

Table 1 shows county-level data for range and pastureland average, most frequently reported rental rates per acre, and average value of rented pasture and rangeland in 2019. We advise the reader to exercise discretion when using these county averages and use these values as one factor to establish rental arrangements.

## Return on Investment

Landowners can determine rental value based on the desired return of investment from their estimated value of the pastureland or rangeland. This is a fairly simple method to estimate the base rental rate per acre. The base rate then can be used to negotiate the final rate, depending on contributions by each party.

To determine the base rate, multiply the estimated value of the land (Table 1; or the value of the land if known) by an accepted rent-to-value ratio and divide by 100 (3.5 percent divided by 100 = 0.035). Rent-to-value ratios will

**Table 1.** Average rental rates, most frequently used average rental rate, and average value of land for rangeland and nonirrigated pastureland in North Dakota in 2019.

County	Average Rental Rate	Most Frequently Reported Rental rate	Average Value of Rented Pastureland
----- dollars/ac -----			
Adams	18.90	20.00	763.00
Barnes	27.90	30.00	1,168.00
Benson	17.40	20.00	438.00
Billings	19.20	19.00	819.00
Bottineau	16.40	20.00	783.00
Bowman	14.30	15.00	718.00
Burke	14.00	15.00	575.00
Burleigh	24.20	20.00	1,159.00
Cass	29.50	20.00	1,604.00
Cavalier <sup>1</sup>	18.00	10.00	825.00
Dickey	39.30	40.00	1,555.00
Divide	8.50	10.00	455.00
Dunn	16.30	15.00	1,030.00
Eddy	21.00	25.00	845.00
Emmons	25.50	25.00	1,284.00
Foster	27.70	30.00	1,027.00
Golden Valley	16.20	15.00	846.00
Grand Forks	21.00	15.00	1,138.00
Grant	18.70	18.00	829.00
Griggs	18.30	15.00	1,127.00
Hettinger	16.50	12.00	823.00
Kidder	22.00	25.00	766.00
LaMoure	32.80	25.00	1,156.00
Logan	25.40	25.00	973.00
McHenry	17.50	15.00	866.00
McIntosh	30.40	25.00	1,148.00
McKenzie	12.80	7.00	631.00
McLean	18.00	15.00	1,077.00
Mercer	18.10	15.00	889.00
Morton	18.60	20.00	1,131.00
Mountrail	12.90	10.00	956.00
Nelson	18.50	20.00	900.00
Oliver	17.80	15.00	1,095.00
Pembina	27.90	20.00	889.00
Pierce	20.70	15.00	881.00
Ramsey	24.30	30.00	825.00
Ransom	38.60	35.00	1,693.00
Renville	17.20	10.00	675.00
Richland	36.10	30.00	1,757.00
Rolette	16.40	10.00	783.00
Sargent	36.00	35.00	1,893.00
Sheridan	17.50	20.00	933.00
Sioux	18.50	7.00	963.00
Slope	17.10	12.00	711.00
Stark	20.50	20.00	1,018.00
Steele	23.80	10.00	875.00
Stutsman	24.80	30.00	1,157.00
Towner	15.70	15.00	838.00
Traill	20.00	20.00	1,077.00
Walsh	16.90	15.00	991.00
Ward	16.60	15.00	744.00
Wells	20.70	15.00	889.00
Williams	11.10	10.00	532.00

<sup>1</sup> Values for Cavalier County are from the 2018 survey

vary from year to year based on typical returns you would expect from a bank or investment. These numbers can vary from 1.5 to 8 percent, depending on county, region, area and state. Based on published reports, pasture rent appears to range from 1.5 to 2 percent of market value in the Midwest (2) and 3.5 to 6 percent of market value reported in the West (1). You, as a landowner or tenant, can determine what ratio-to-value return you are comfortable with when starting negotiations (see formula below or Worksheet D of the Range and Pasture Calculator).

**Formula:**  $\frac{\text{\% desired return}}{\text{\% desired return}} \div 100 \times \frac{\text{Value of land/ac}}{\text{Value of land/ac}} = \frac{\text{Rental rate/acre}}{\text{Rental rate/acre}}$

**Example 1**

**Rangeland in Mercer County**

Average land value in 2019 at \$889/acre

Fair market return at 1.7 percent:  $0.017 \times \$889 = \$15.11/\text{acre}$

Fair market return at 2.5 percent:  $0.025 \times \$889 = \$22.23/\text{acre}$

North Dakota NASS 2019 average rental rate: \$18.10; most frequent rate: \$20

A landowner can determine a starting point for return on investment based on his/her land value and calculate a return on investment with which he/she is comfortable. Landowner can use the North Dakota NASS report and compare rental values of calculated rents versus survey rental reports for their county.

Landowners should be open to negotiate based on supply and demand, trust and a positive relationship with potential tenants, current livestock market values and trends, and acceptable contributions by both parties on the management of the livestock herd and upkeep of the pasture infrastructure.

**Example 2**

**Brome Grass (improved) Pasture in Ransom County**

Average land value in 2019 at \$1,693/acre

Fair market return at 1.7 percent:  $0.017 \times \$1,693 = \$28.78/\text{acre}$

Fair market return at 2.5 percent:  $0.025 \times \$1,693 = \$42.33/\text{acre}$

North Dakota NASS 2019 average rental rate: \$38.60; most frequent rate: \$35

## Renting by the Animal Unit Month (AUM)

Renting by the animal unit month (AUM) provides the most equitable option for the landowner and tenant while reducing the risk for overgrazing or understocking. Overgrazing reduces the long-term ecological function of the plant community, reducing plant vigor and forage production potential in future years, and impacts overall livestock performance of the herd (gain per day and gain per acre), especially for future years.

Understocking leads to reduced income potential for the landowner because the tenant only pays for that number of animal units grazed. Understocking may be desirable in some cases; for example: when improved wildlife habitat is desired to increase wildlife populations.

A note of caution: Understocking for a period of many years (two years or longer, depending on location) will create a buildup of litter and a cooler, wetter micro-climate that favors the invasion of exotic, cool-season grasses in the Northern Plains, thereby negatively impacting plant communities on native rangelands.

### Calculating AUMs: Stocking Rate

Using the AUM rental method, the tenant pays rent based on the number of animals grazed and length of time the pasture is used (see formula below or Worksheet E of the Range and Pasture Calculator). To determine AUMs, you first must convert the livestock class to an animal unit equivalent (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Animal unit equivalents (AUE) guide<sup>1</sup>.

Kinds/Classes of Animals	Animal Unit Equivalent (AUE)	Forage Consumed in Pounds (air-dried <sup>2</sup> )	
		Day	Month
1,000-lb. cow, dry	0.92	28	851
1,000-lb. cow, with calf	1.00	30	913
1,200-lb. cow, with calf	1.15	35	1,064
1,400-lb. cow, with calf	1.29	39	1,186
Cattle bull, mature	1.40	42.5	1,295
Weaned calves to yearling	0.60	18	547
Yearling cattle (600-800 lbs.)	0.70	21	638
2-year-old cattle (800-1,000 lbs.)	0.90	27	832
Bison cow, mature	1.00	30	913
Bison bull, mature	1.50	45	1,368
Horse, mature	1.25	38	1,155
Sheep, mature with lamb	0.20	6	182
Sheep ram	0.25	7.5	228
Goat, mature	0.15	5	152
Deer, white-tailed, mature	0.15	5	152
Deer, mule, mature	0.20	6	182
Elk, mature	0.60	18	547
Antelope, mature	0.20	6	182
Sheep, bighorn, mature	0.20	6	182
Jackrabbit, white-tailed	0.02	0.6	18
Prairie dog	0.004	0.1	3

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from NRCS National Range and Pasture Handbook (1997) and Montana State University Range and Pasture Records (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Air-dried weight refers to forage that is allowed to dry under natural environmental conditions during an extended period of time, such as plants harvested for hay production. This value is approximately 87 percent dry matter versus oven-dried weight, which depicts 100 percent dry matter.

**Stocking Rate Formula:**  $\frac{\text{# of head}}{\text{AUE (table 2)}} \times \frac{\text{animal units (AU)}}{\text{months (M)}} = \text{AUMs}$

An animal unit (AU) is based on forage consumption of a 1,000-pound cow with a calf up to 6 months of age, or daily consumption of 26 pounds per /day of oven-dried forage or 30 pounds per day of air-dried forage. An AUM is the amount of forage consumed by one AU for one month (M).

For more information on calculating stocking rates, refer to “Determining Carrying Capacity and Stocking Rates for Range and Pasture in North Dakota” (R1810).

**Calculating AUM Rental Rate: Carrying Capacity**

The value for pasture rental rates using the AUM method can be highly variable and driven by supply and demand. Little to no survey data is available in North Dakota that provides an average or most frequently used AUM rate. However, once you have calculated your rental rate by the acre, you can convert that value to an AUM rate.

Calculating the AUM rate requires that the average carrying capacity for your pasture be determined. For landowners who do not know the carrying capacity of their pasture or rangeland, Table 3 is included to provide an estimated stocking rate guide for different regions (see Figure 1 for multiple land resource areas) of North Dakota. For more information on calculating carrying capacity, refer to “Determining Carrying Capacity and Stocking Rates for Range and Pasture in North Dakota” (R1810).

The landowner and tenant agree upon a per-acre rental rate and determine total payment for the pasture using the assumption that livestock will graze for the entire planned grazing season (even if they don’t). Then the landowner estimates his/her carrying capacity of the pasture to be rented (we highly recommend determining actual carrying capacity using a current or past conservation plan.)

The landowner must categorize all acres within the pasture by upland and lowland vegetation types (also will need soil type; for example loamy, sandy, clayey). Each vegetation type is multiplied by the recommended stocking rate from Table 3 to determine AUMs available.

Finally, divide the total payment by the AUMs available in the pasture to determine the AUM rental rate (see formula below or Worksheet E of the Range and Pasture Calculator). By using this value, the tenant pays only for the number of animal units he/she grazes for the given time period.

**Example 3**

100 1,200-pound cows with calves with a planned grazing schedule of May 15 - Nov. 1 and four mature bulls grazed from July 1 - Sept. 15

$100 \times 1.15 = 115 \text{ AU} \times 5.5 \text{ M} = 632.5 \text{ AUMs}$   
 $4 \times 1.50 = 6 \text{ AU} \times 2.5 \text{ M} = 15.0 \text{ AUMs}$

**Total 647.5 AUMs**

**Example 4**

250 sheep with lambs with a planned grazing schedule of June 1 - Nov. 1 and five rams from Sept. 1 - Nov. 1

$250 \times 0.20 = 50 \text{ AU} \times 5 \text{ M} = 250.0 \text{ AUMs}$   
 $5 \times 0.25 = 1.25 \text{ AU} \times 2 \text{ M} = 2.5 \text{ AUMs}$

**Total 252.5 AUMs**

**Table 3.** Estimated carrying capacity guide in animal unit months per acre (AUM/ac) by site and multiple land resource areas (MLRA<sup>1</sup>) for reference plant communities<sup>2</sup>.

Vegetation Type	53A&B	54	55A&B	56	58C&D
<b>Upland</b>					
Loamy	0.66	0.66	0.71	0.85	0.57
Sandy	0.68	0.66	0.77	0.85	0.55
Clayey	0.63	0.57	0.66	0.82	0.52
Shallow	0.60	0.38	0.52	0.60	0.36
Very shallow/ Thin claypan	0.30	0.24	0.37	0.43	0.22
<b>Lowland</b>					
Overflow	0.96	0.87	1.01	1.15	0.57
Wet meadow	1.23	1.16	1.28	1.37	0.92

<sup>1</sup> See Figure 1 to determine the MLRA in which you live.

<sup>2</sup> Animal unit months/acre by vegetation type are based on a 0.25 harvest efficiency.

**Figure 1.** Major land resource areas of North Dakota.

North Dakota state agencies and the ND GIS Hub



**Carrying capacity formula:**  $\frac{\text{_____}}{\text{\# of acres}} \times \frac{\text{_____}}{\text{Recommended AUM/ac}} = \frac{\text{_____}}{\text{AUMs (Table 3)}}$  (Repeat for all vegetation types)

**AUM rental rate formula:**  $\frac{\text{_____}}{\text{Total payment based on agreed per-acre rental rate}} \div \frac{\text{_____}}{\text{Total AUMs from combined vegetation types using carrying capacity formula}} = \frac{\text{_____}}{\text{AUM rate}}$

**Recommended head to graze formula:**  $\frac{\text{_____}}{\text{Total AUMs}} \div \frac{\text{_____}}{\text{Months of planned grazing}} = \frac{\text{_____}}{\text{Max. \# of animal units to graze}}$

### Example 5

1,000-acre pasture in Mercer County (MLRA 54<sup>1</sup>) with an agreed rental price of \$18.10/acre for a total payment of \$18,100. The planned grazing season is May 15 – Nov. 1 (5.5 months). Pasture contains 70 percent sandy vegetation type, 20 percent shallow vegetation type and 10 percent overflow vegetation type.

Sandy: 700 acres x 0.66 AUM/ac<sup>2</sup> = 462 AUM  
 Shallow: 200 acres x 0.38 AUM/ac<sup>2</sup> = 76 AUM  
 Overflow: 100 acres x 0.87 AUM/ac<sup>2</sup> = 87 AUM

**Total: 625 AUM**

Rental rate = \$28.96/AUM (\$18,100 ÷ 625 AUMs)

Number of recommended animal units (AU) = 113.6 AU (625 AUM ÷ 5.5 months)

Number of recommended 1,200-pound cows with calves = 99 head (113.6 AU ÷ 1.15 AUE<sup>3</sup> - 1,200-pound cow with calf) for 5.5 months

<sup>1</sup> Shown in Figure 1.  
<sup>2</sup> Taken from Table 3.  
<sup>3</sup> Taken from Table 2.

### Example 6

1,000-acre pasture in Ransom County (MLRA 55B<sup>1</sup>) with an agreed rental price of \$38.60/acre for a total payment of \$38,600. The planned grazing season is May 15 – Nov. 1 (5.5 months). Pasture contains 70 percent sandy vegetation type, 20 percent shallow vegetation type and 10 percent overflow vegetation type.

Sandy: 700 acres x 0.77 AUM/ac<sup>2</sup> = 539 AUM  
 Shallow: 200 acres x 0.52 AUM/ac<sup>2</sup> = 104 AUM  
 Overflow: 100 acres x 1.01 AUM/ac<sup>2</sup> = 101 AUM

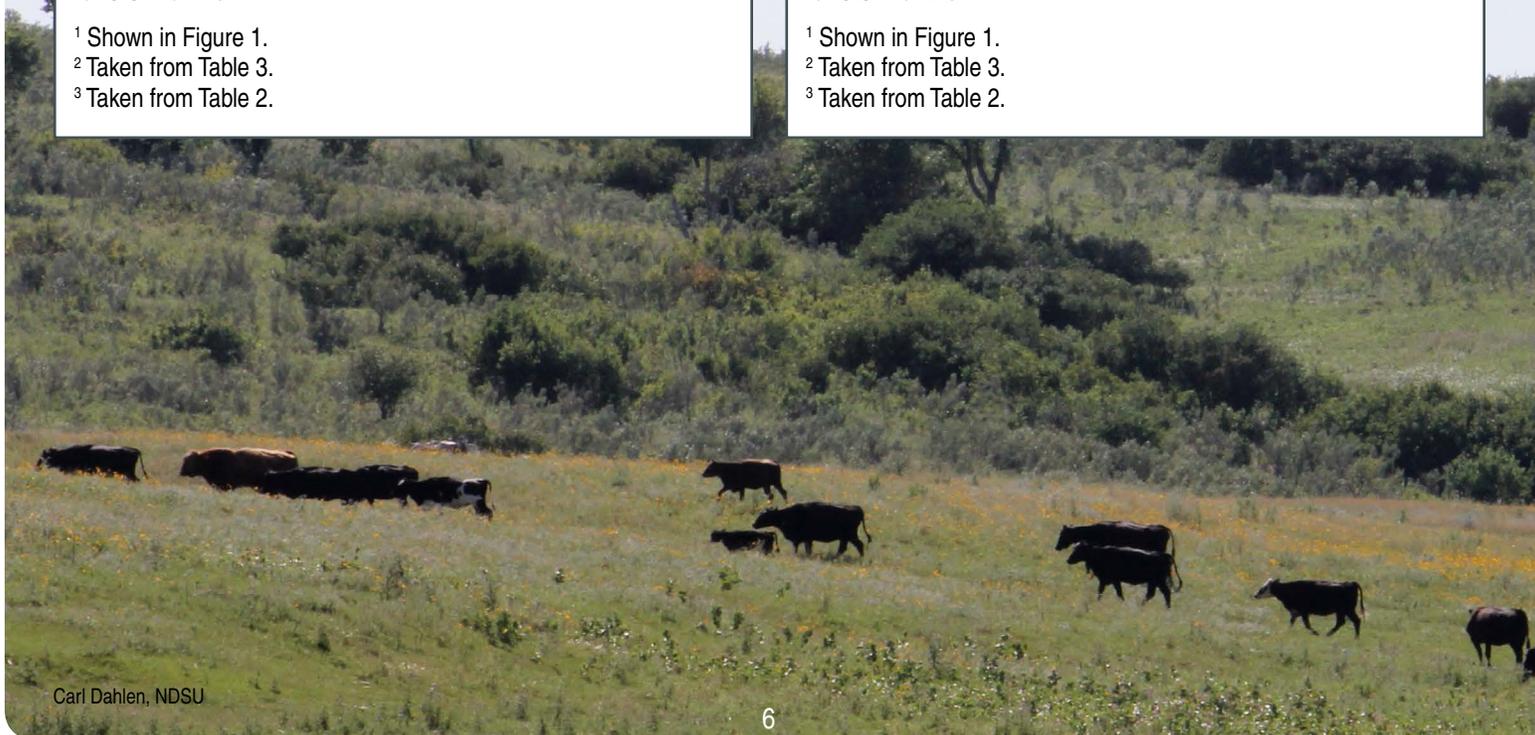
**Total: 744 AUM**

Rental rate = \$51.88/AUM (\$38,600 ÷ 744 AUMs)

Number of recommended animal units (AU) = 135.3 AU (744 AUM ÷ 5.5 months)

Number of recommended 1,200-pound cows with calves = 118 head (135.3 AU ÷ 1.15 AUE<sup>3</sup> - 1,200-pound cow with calf) for 5.5 months

<sup>1</sup> Shown in Figure 1.  
<sup>2</sup> Taken from Table 3.  
<sup>3</sup> Taken from Table 2.



# Renting Using Pasture Quality Factors

(Use for annual forages such as cover crops and crop residue)

Pasture quality factors (PQF) is a method recommended for annual forage and improved pastures. This method commonly is used on improved pastures such as orchard grass and tall fescue in the east-central regions of the U.S. However, it may provide a base price for annual crops and residues in the northern regions.

The PQF method uses current market value for hay price per ton. This hay price is multiplied by the PQF that best describes the pasture type (Table 4). **Note:** The hay price should represent the average price of good-quality grass hay for all pasture types with a PQF of 0.18 or lower. Use the average price for equal quality hay that represents PQF of 0.22 and 0.20 (see Table 4) to best represent the hay needed to replace higher-quality pastures.

This concept is designed to best represent the value of high-quality pastures; however, if a livestock producer were to replace hay with lower-quality pastures, he/she still would need to feed a good-quality hay.

Then this value is multiplied by the animal unit equivalent (AUE) for the class and size of livestock grazed (Table 2; see formula below or Worksheet F of the Range and Pasture Calculator). The rental rate will be represented as dollars per AUM.

This formula works because the renter pays for the forage crop (hay) harvested with livestock as an alternative to machinery. The AUM grazing formula is adapted for forage moisture content, pounds consumed, forage volume within the pasture and plant population.

## Example 7

### Calculating AUM rental rate for high-quality, lush-growth pasture planted to a cover crop

Market price for equivalent hay is \$140 a ton (**A** = 140)

Pasture quality is lush-growth, cover crop (**B** = 0.22)

Cow/calf pairs (1,200-pound cows - 1.15 AUE) (**C** = 1.15)

$$140 \times 0.22 \times 1.15 = \$35.42/\text{AUM}$$

## Example 8

### Calculating AUM rental rate for very good-quality pasture with some seed heads and green

Market price for equivalent hay is \$80 a ton (**A** = 80)

Very good-quality pasture and green (**B** = 0.20)

Cow-calf pairs (1,200-pound cows) (1.15 AUE) (**C** = 1.15)

$$80 \times 0.20 \times 1.15 = \$18.40/\text{AUM}$$

### AUM grazing rate formula using PQF:

$$\underline{A} \times \underline{B} \times \underline{C} = \underline{\text{Pasture rent per animal unit month}}$$

A = market price per ton of hay, B = pasture quality factor, C = animal unit equivalent (AUE)

For this method, the market value of baled hay and the quality of the pasture are entered into an equation with the appropriate AUE. "A" in the equation is hay market price per ton. "B" is a pasture quality factor. "C" is the AU conversion factor.

## Example 9

### Calculating AUM rental rate for pasture consisting of wheat crop residue with some regrowth

Market price for good-quality hay is \$60 a ton (**A** = 60)

Small-grain residue pasture with some (limited) regrowth (**B** = 0.12)

Cow-calf pairs (1,400-pound cows) (1.29 AUE) (**C** = 1.29)

$$60 \times 0.12 \times 1.29 = \$9.29/\text{AUM}$$

**Table 4.** Pasture quality factors and hay type to use for fair market value for determining rental rates by pasture type and quality.

Type of Pasture	PQF <sup>1</sup>	Hay Type to Use for Fair Market Value <sup>2</sup>
Lush, green, high-protein pasture, cover crops and new-growth annuals	0.22	Good-quality alfalfa hay (RVF ~ 150)
Very good pasture with limited seed heads; excellent meadows with grass and legumes	0.20	High-quality grass hay or mid-quality alfalfa hay (RVF 100 – 140)
Good pasture, more grass than legumes, plants headed but still green	0.18	Good-quality grass hay (RVF 80 – 100)
Fair to good pasture dominated by grass in the heading stage	0.15	Good-quality grass hay (RVF 80 – 100)
Unimproved, poor or weedy pasture; small-grain residue with limited but some regrowth	0.12	Good-quality grass hay (RVF 80 – 100)
Cornstalks, small-grain residue with no regrowth	0.10	Good-quality grass hay (RVF 80 – 100)

<sup>1</sup> Hofstrand and Edwards, 2015. Computing a pasture rental rate, Ag Decision Maker File C2-23. Iowa State University, [www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/agdm)

<sup>2</sup> Fair market value can be determined through local auctions, advertised rates or contacting your local county Extension agent.

## Citations

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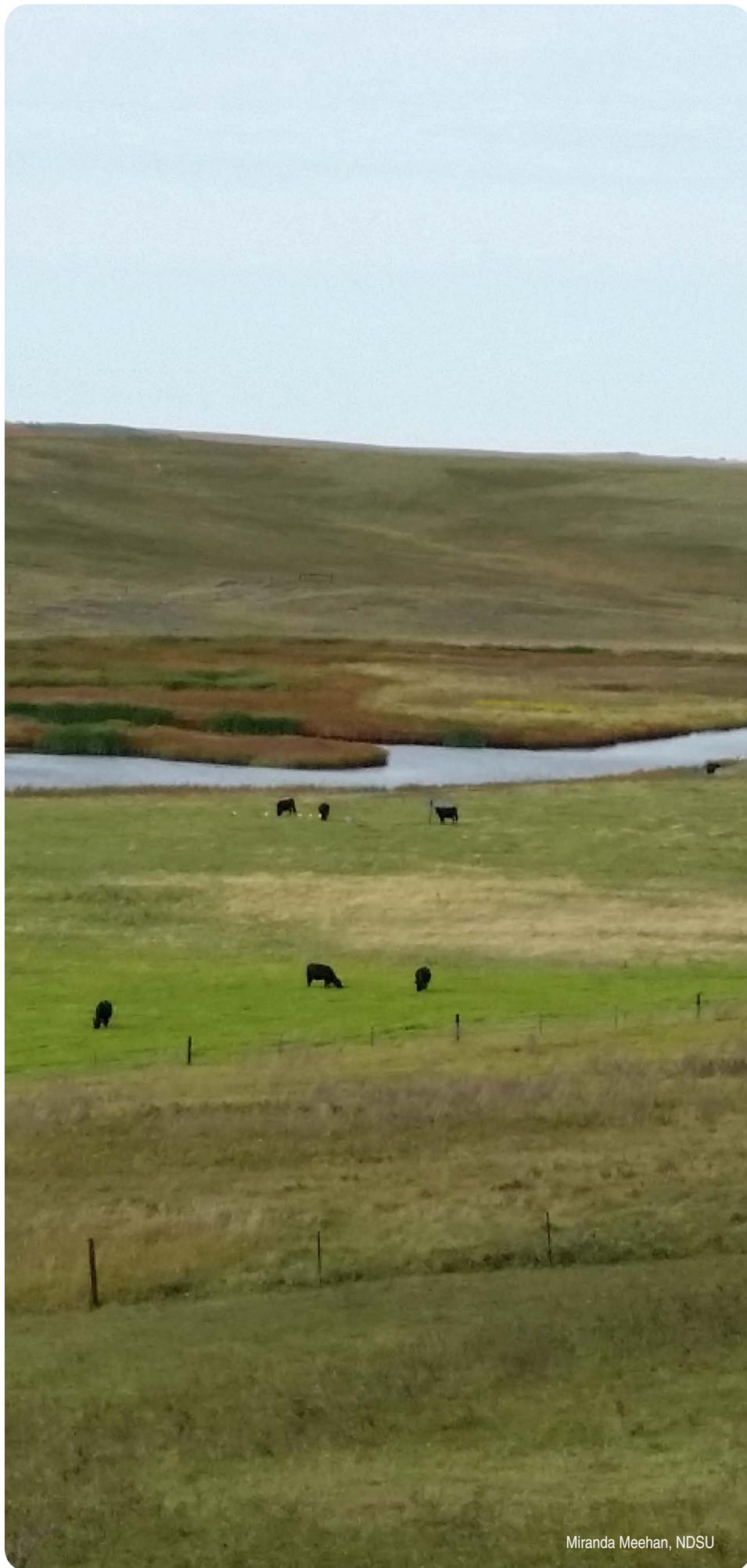
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