

RUNOFF AND SEDIMENT YIELD UNDER GRAZING IN FOOTHILLS FESCUE GRASSLANDS OF ALBERTA*

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BACKGROUND

Grazing has hydrologic impacts on Canadian foothills fescue grasslands through alteration of plant species composition, plant density, ground cover and litter (Johnston, 1961; Naeth et al., 1991a and 1991b). Livestock trample vegetation and may compact the soil (Naeth et al. 1990a), reduce infiltration (Naeth et al. 1990b), increase runoff (Johnston 1962) and alter soil water regime (Naeth et al. 1991c). Johnston (1962) found runoff and sediment yield from rainfall simulations increased with increased grazing intensity and reduced ground cover.

The objectives of this study were to quantify the effects of short duration and continuous (throughout the growing season) grazing systems on runoff and sediment yield from sloped areas of the foothills fescue grasslands of Alberta. There has been relatively little hydrologic research conducted on these or similar grasslands, particularly under snowmelt and natural precipitation conditions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study site is located at the Agriculture Canada Stavely Range Substation, approximately 100 km northwest of Lethbridge, Alberta. Annual precipitation is approximately 550 mm with 40% occurring as snow (Strong and Leggat, 1981). The topography is generally hilly and slopes on the study site range from 18 to 37%. Soils are generally fertile and well drained. Black surface soil averages 8 to 10 cm in thickness with 5 cm on the uplands and 15 to 18 cm in gently rolling flats. Depth to the C horizon is approximately 60 cm. Dominant soils are Orthic Black Chernozems (Typic Cryoboroll) (Walker et al., 1991). *Festuca campestris* Rydb. (rough fescue) dominates the ungrazed and lightly grazed areas; *Danthonia parryi* Scribn. (Parry's oatgrass) dominates the heavily grazed areas and exposed sites with thin soils. There are a variety of subdominant grasses, forbs and shrubs. Lightly and heavily grazed fields were dominated by *Festuca campestris* and *Danthonia parryi*, respectively. Under very heavy grazing, *Festuca campestris* and litter were virtually eliminated. *Populus tremuloides* Michx. (trembling aspen) encroached upon lightly and moderately grazed grassland.

In 1988, research sites were established in the 40-year-old continuous grazing treatments and 4-year-old short duration grazing treatments. Treatments contrast between the historical grazing regime (continuous throughout the growing season) and short-duration, high intensity grazing. Continuous treatments were grazed from May through October; short-duration treatments were grazed for one week in mid-June. Heavy and very heavy stocking densities at 2.4 and 4.8 animal unit months (AUM) ha⁻¹, respectively, in both the short duration and continuous treatments, represent common grazing intensities for the area. The short duration treatments consisted of two 30 by 120 m grazed strips (heavy and very heavy grazing) and a 10 by 120 m control (ungrazed) each replicated three times, running downslope in a randomized split block design. The continuous treatments were located approximately 0.5 km from the short duration sites, running down the same slope but without a control. All treatments had an east facing aspect.

Runoff and sediment yield were monitored following snowmelt and after rainfall events using three 1-m² runoff frames per treatment (1 L of runoff corresponds to a water depth of 1 mm from the frames). The outlet end of the frames was trapezoidal in shape and was connected to a collection system consisting of a 20-L plastic pail located within a 64-L plastic pail buried in the ground. Upper-slope frames were installed in 1988 and mid-slope frames in 1989. At the time of runoff measurement, three subsamples of the runoff water, each 284 mL in size, were taken for sediment analyses. Samples were evaporated in a drying oven and the sediment weighed.

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Snow depth was measured with a meter stick at ten locations within each treatment/slope area near the runoff frames several times during the winter before snowmelt. The beginning of snowmelt was the time water started to run off from the frames. Snowmelt runoff volumes were generally determined several times during the snowmelt period and summed to give a total snowmelt value for each frame. Runoff was considered as accumulated runoff water from snowmelt and both as individual summer storm and accumulated summer runoff.

For each parameter, significant differences of the means were detected with Analysis of Variance techniques with design following the convention outlined in the SPSS-X User Manual (SPSS 1988) for split blocks. Significant effects were further evaluated using Student-Newman-Keul's (SNK) multiple comparison of means test at the 90% confidence limit (Steel and Torrie, 1980).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Snow depth was greatest in the treatments with the highest amount of fallen and standing litter which effectively trapped snow. Average snowmelt runoff among treatments ranged from 3.3 to 105.7 L; this runoff was highest in 1991 and lowest in 1990. The ranking of snowmelt runoff by decreasing magnitude (1991, 1989 and 1990) parallels that of over-winter precipitation. Runoff was generally three to four times higher from mid-slope than from the upper-slope, likely due to a slightly steeper slope in the mid-slope position and more snow trapped there in the woody vegetation. There was a consistent trend across both grazing intensities of snowmelt volume with the very heavy treatments being less than those for the heavy treatments, except for the short duration treatments on the mid-slope in 1991.

Snowmelt runoff generally decreased with increasing grazing intensity from heavy to very heavy. The trend is likely due to higher litter and vegetation accumulations in the heavily grazed treatments which trapped more snow, resulting in increased runoff. Snowmelt runoff from the controls was generally similar to that from the short duration heavy treatment (average ratio of 1.01 across upper and mid slope positions and years), reflecting the trend in snow accumulation.

Sediment yields as a result of snowmelt were generally low: most were <4 g. Sediment yield was lowest in the short duration very heavy treatment, and was generally higher (average 312%) from the mid-slope position than the upper-slope position, a result of higher runoff in the former location. Sediment concentrations under snowmelt were generally similar across grazing treatments and dates, likely due to frozen soil conditions. Most concentrations were between 0.07 and 0.18 g L⁻¹. Concentrations for the upper-slope position were higher than those for the mid-slope position in all cases except two, by an average 61%.

Rainfall runoff was greatest from the short duration very heavy treatment in the mid-slope position in all three years and in one of four years in the upper-slope position. Runoff was generally lowest in the control. Runoff increased as grazing intensity increased (heavy to very heavy). On only five summer monitoring dates over four years were runoff volumes greater than 5 L: 18 August 1988, 19 June 1989, 2 and 16 August 1990, 8 October 1991. Runoff coefficients for rainstorm runoff were all below 0.11, indicating that only a small portion of rainfall results in runoff. These low runoff coefficients, even for heavily grazed areas, are likely due to the characteristic low intensity rainfall and to generally dry antecedent soil water conditions.

Total rainstorm sediment yields were generally highest for the continuous treatments and lowest for the control. There was a general trend to lower sediment yield in the upper slope position than in the mid-slope one. Of the 35 annual values reported, only 3 exceeded 10 g while 25 were less than 5 g. The majority of the total sediment yield occurred in August 1988 when 36.8 mm of rainfall fell on wet ground.

Sediment concentrations increased under grazing compared to the control and were 4 to 10 times higher under rainfall than snowmelt. Soil particle detachment occurs more easily under rainfall than snowmelt, resulting in the higher ratios under rainfall. Also detachment increases as protective vegetative cover is removed by grazing.

The highest sediment yield measured was 33.7 g; converted to a ha-basis, this gives an erosion rate of 0.337 t ha⁻¹; a very low rate. Because overland flow from above the frame was excluded, only runoff initiation processes were measured and thus sediment yields would be expected to be low. Thus, additional research is required to assess gully erosion, which occurs on a much broader scale, before definitive conclusions of the erosion susceptibility of these

rangelands can be drawn. Visual examination of these rangelands indicates the presence of gullies, probably due to the concentration of runoff flows from snowmelt and from the infrequent summer storms that cause runoff.

Annual runoff was dominated by snowmelt-induced runoff. On average, 70% of total annual runoff occurred as a result of snowmelt. Thus, snowmelt dominates annual runoff, regardless of slope position and grazing treatment, at this site. Snowmelt had previously been identified as the time of major runoff and erosion hazard for cultivated fields in the Peace River region of Alberta, with summer storms that caused significant erosion to be infrequent (Chanasyk and Woytowich, 1987).

CONCLUSIONS

The majority of annual runoff occurred during snowmelt. Snowmelt runoff decreased with increasing grazing intensity and was generally higher from the two heavy treatments and the control than from the very heavy treatments, due to the higher accumulated snow in the former treatments, in turn due to higher standing vegetation and litter there. Thus, any grazing regime that reduces vegetation markedly will also reduce snowmelt runoff in this area. Snowmelt sediment yields were generally low. Ratios of sediment yield to runoff volume under snowmelt were generally similar across grazing treatments and dates.

Few summer storms caused runoff, and runoff volumes from summer rainstorms were low. As grazing increased, so did rainstorm runoff coefficients and sediment yields. Rainstorm runoff coefficients increased over the control due to grazing, with intensity of grazing generally increasing the coefficients consistently only under short duration grazing and sometimes under continuous grazing. Rainstorm sediment concentrations increased under grazing compared to the control. Antecedent soil moisture conditions appear to play a significant role in determining whether summer runoff occurs.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF SPONSORS	vi
INDUSTRIAL FACILITIES	
Industrial Site Decommissioning in Alberta	1
Walter J. Ceroici	
Changing Knowledge Needs for Wellsite Reclamation	3
Jim Smith	
The Orphan Facilities and Pipeline Program: An Industry/Government Responsibility	7
David Lloyd and David Sandmeyer	
In-Situ Amelioration of Sodic Mine Spoil Using Sulfur, Gypsum and Crop Management ...	11
Jeff J. Sansom, M. Anne Naeth, and David S. Chanasyk	
Bioremediation of Contaminated Sites	13
Christopher Schneider	
Contaminant Metal Concentration in Alberta Soils Under Different Land Uses	17
Gerry Lutwick, Gordon D. Dinwoodie, David Gower and G. E. Nason	
Waste Disposal Guidelines from a Testing Lab's Perspective	19
John Ashworth	
Reclamation of a Former Heavy Oil Plant in Northeastern Alberta	23
Tim R. Bossenberry, J. Jeffrey Wilson, David Evans, Darrell Chollak and George Walker	
Nutrient and Metal Levels and Dynamics on a 30-year Revegetated Copper-Nickel Tailings Site at Copper Cliff, Ontario	27
Jeremy Niemi, John Giffen and Keith Winterhalder	
FORESTS	
Land Application of BCTMP Mill Waste Research in Alberta	31
Terry M. Macyk	
Reclamation to Native Forest Ecosystems in the Oil Sand Region	33
Steve Tuttle	
Land Capability Classification for Forest Ecosystems	37
Leonard A. Leskiw, Steve Tuttle and Earle Anderson	
Forest Land Restoration on Vancouver Island	39
David Polster	

Lichen Diversity in the Reclaimed Areas of Sudbury, Ontario	43
S. Wainio and Peter Beckett	

MOUNTAINS

Application of Population Biology, Conservation Biology and Succession Theory to the Reclamation of a High Elevation Coal Mine	47
Clint R. Smyth	

Plant Community Changes in Response to Anchor Chaining and Seeding on Pinyon/Juniper Sites in Central Utah	51
J. Gregory Sutor	

Tailings Disposal and Reclamation at the Coal Valley Mine	53
Dane McCoy	

In-Pit Disposal Program for Acid Generating Waste Rock	57
Jamie Quesnel and S. W. Stogran	

Reclamation, Trans Canada Highway Twinning, Banff National Park	63
Otto Hammer	

GENERAL ISSUES

Railway Reclamation: Issues and Opportunities	67
Chris B. Powter and David A. Lloyd	

Experiences in Reclaiming Railways Under Alberta's new Reclamation Guidelines	71
Mark Polet	

Pipeline Abandonment: A Discussion Paper	73
Karen Etherington	

Legal Perspectives on Land Reclamation	75
Gilbert Van Nes	

Liability for Reclamation: Enforcement at Common Law	77
Adrian Currie	

WATER AND WETLANDS

Coursier Reservoir: The Planning and Costs Associated with the Reconstruction and Revegetation of a Subalpine Lake	81
J. Leah Jackson	

Spray Lakes Reclamation Project	85
Margwyn R. Zacaruk	

The Pine Coulee Project: Linking Reclamation Planning to Impact Assessment	89
Ron Middleton	

Design and Construction Management Aspects of Constructed Wetlands	93
Bernard Amell and Kim Eastlick	

Natural Revegetation of an Alberta Peatland after Horticultural Peat Extraction	97
Wayne S. Tedder and Larry W. Turchenek	

RUNOFF/EROSION

Computer Modelling of Soil Erosion from Reclaimed Land	101
Les Sawatsky, Wes Dick and Senarath Ekanayake	

Runoff and Sediment Yield under Grazing in Foothills Fescue Grassland of Alberta	103
M. Anne Naeth and David S. Chanasyk	

Runoff Curve Numbers for Two Reclaimed Watersheds in Central Alberta	107
Ted E. Harms and David S. Chanasyk	

Vegetation Characteristics, Grazing Disturbance and Soil Erosion	111
Suzanne I. Gill, M. Anne Naeth, David S. Chanasyk and V. S. Baron	

PRAIRIE

Renewing the Ecological Integrity of Disturbed Native Prairie	113
Heather S. Gerling	

Mixed Grass Prairie habitat Restoration Project: Landscape Restoration in the Moist Mixed Grass Prairie	117
Dean Nerberg	

Native Prairie Regeneration After Pipeline Construction: A Comparison Between Topsoil Stripping versus No Topsoil Stripping During Construction	119
Gordon Dunn and Gina Fryer	

Restoration of Native Sandhills Vegetation after Pipeline Construction in the Great Sand Hills Region of Saskatchewan	123
David G. Walker, Laurier Kremer and Wayne Marshall	

The Effects of Grazing, Mowing, Glyphosate and Burning on Smooth Brome in Fescue Grassland	125
D. J. Brown and M. Anne Naeth	

VEGETATION

Avoiding Downy Brome When Buying Seed	127
Kerby Lowen and Sarah Foster-Stubbs	

Biodiversity and Reclamation: How Many Species do we Need in a Seed Mix?	131
Dana Bush and M. Anne Naeth	
Germination and Survivability of Selected Native and Introduced Grasses and Legumes	133
William E. Pelech and M. Anne Naeth	
Road Maps for Repairing Ecological Damage	135
Andy Hammermeister	
Ecovar Developments in Western Canada	137
Les Wetter and Brent Wark	
Plant Growth on Aggregated Oil Sands Processing Wastes	139
Xiaomei Li, Jim Storey, Paul Y. P. Yeung and Martin Y. P. Fung	
The Clover Bar Landfill: A State of the Art Landfill Reclamation Process	141
Ann Smreciu, Nolan Turner and Don Barron	
BULK DENSITY	
A Method of Characterizing the Bulk Density of Compressible Particulate Material	145
D. Guenther, Stacy Schaub and J. Leonard	
Near-Surface Compaction Under Grazing of Annual and Perennial Forages	149
Dennis Twerdoff, David S. Chanasyk, M. Anne Naeth and V. S. Baron	
Grazing Impacts on Bulk Density and Soil Strength in the Foothills Fescue Grasslands of Alberta, Canada	151
David S. Chanasyk and M. Anne Naeth	
Computer Modelling of Soil Erosion from Reclaimed Land	155
Les Sawatsky, Wes Dick and Senarath Ekanayake	

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