Grazing Reports Backside Pod Complete

Backside Pod – Pod marked with the red X – June 18, a.m. and p.m.

This pod is heavily treed with many suckering aspen and a limited area of grassy, open patches. The area has a healthy, minimally disturbed soil profile and limited historical grazing. Our goal is to try and control the aspen, promote native grass recruitment, and build soil without over-disturbing the forest floor - but we will revisit in the Fall/early Winter to see if a forestry mulcher might be a better option.

Beyond controlling the aspen, we want to build soil and allow the native grasses to take hold here. From the earlier uploaded soil analysis (under North Side), you can see that this area has a decent soil profile and has been very minimally handled – just grazing. We don't want to lose any of that but do want to build on it as much as we can. There is one small area of decently open grass. Everything else is more-or-less bush.

Pod Context and Management Goals –

- Tree cover – predominantly suckering aspen with dense understory
- Soil – healthy, minimally disturbed profile
- Grazing history – Light – minimal past intervention
- Management Goals
    - Suppress aspen suckers using high animal impact
    - Foster native grass recruitment through trampling/litter deposition
    - Buid soil without overdisturbing the forest floor
    - Assess need for mechanical intervention in fall/winter

Grazing Strategy Recommendations

Rotation Timing

- Short-duration, high-impact graze (90-120 minutes recommended)

- Repeat seasonally (early summer, later summer, fall) to maximize aspen suppression while allowing grass recovery

Aspen Suppression

- Targeted Browsing – flerd (especially sheep) will help by:
    - Bark stripping saplings
    - Leaf browsing on suckers (especially lambs and alpacas)
- Follow-up – reassess in Fall for regrowth patterns; use this year's impact to guide future mechanical work

Native Grass Promotion

- Allow light defoliation in open patches, but avoid repeat grazing too soon
- Trampling and manure will improve seed-to-soil contact and microbe stimulation
- Don't worry if grasses are lightly grazed – building up root mass is priority.

Ground Cover and Soil

- Monitor bare ground vs. litter deposition
    - Some trampling is beneficial – too much = erosion risk
- Use a "50-30-20" post-graze visual check
    - 50 per cent litter/residue
    - 30 per cent trampled but covered
    - <20 per cent bare soil exposure
- If deep shade supresses grasses, consider:
    - Very light goat browsing?
    - Manure application near canopy breaks
    - Overseeding with native grasses

Animal Behaviour Monitoring

During graze:

- Do they concentrate in open patches or move through the bush?
- Any clear signs of bark stripping or sucker grazing?
- Avoidance patterns may reveal unpalatable or waterlogged areas

After graze look for:

- Stripped bark or chewed suckers
- Crushed brush and broken branches (good signs of disturbance)
- Manure concentration and trampling in key zones

Rainfall and Regrowth

- If rain is expected:
    - Leaving trampled biomass will create ideal mulch and water retention
- If dry:
    - Prioritize shade-littered zones for recovery

- Delay return until strong regrowth on indicator grasses

Visual Assessment Summary

Photo 1: Close-up Understory

- Litter layer – excellent natural mulch – heavy aspen leaf litter with good fungal activity likely.
- Grass layer – mix of fine native grasses and young legumes/vetches present
- Forbs/legumes – low to moderate density – shows potential for improved species richness with rotational impact.
- Bare soil – minimal, well-covered.

Ideal conditions for building soil. Protect this base.

Photo 2: Open Grassy Clearing

- Aspen suckers – widespread but spaced. Moderate browsing pressure should check them.
- Grass height – 6 – 10" with seedheads on some plants, early reproductive stage
- Plant diversity – looks fair. Dandelions dominate edge areas, variety of grasses visible
- Tree line – creates transition zone for shade grazing – useful during hot spells

Use as a "resting graze" area to disperse impact from denser bush.

Photo 3: Dandelion-dense Patch

- Ground cover – mostly full, but dandelions dominate – indicator of disturbance or compaction
- Aspen juveniles – present but not over-bearing
- Forbs and legumes – clover seen – this is promising, but competing with taprooted dandelions

Could be improved with trample + manure + selective grazing. This area would benefit from rebalancing species competition.

Photo 4: Open Middle Ground (facing home paddock fence line)

- Ground cover – 95 per cent +, healthy and uniform
- Species – dandelion still prominent but balanced by fine grasses and some clover
- Soil exposure – minimal
- Aspen presence – widely spaced, easier to target
- Note: this is the most flexible, graze-ready zone

Ideal for moderate trampling and even grazing pressure. Prioritize this zone to anchor recovery.

Photo 5: Transition Zone (Fence and Aspen edge)

- Aspen suckers – denser here, mid-sized saplings present
- Forage layer – strong, mostly grasses; some shade-tolerant forbs
- Canopy cover – light to moderate

- Potential – great opportunity for browsing and bark-stripping if time-limited graze is done before suckers lignify

Target this area for behavioural browsing. Use mineral or water access to pull traffic through.

Photo 6: Dense Forest Interior (Aspen understory)

- Aspen suckers – dominant. High density at 2 – 4 ft tall
- Ground flora – minimal – light grass and forb presence only
- Litter – high – excellent for soil-building but limiting forage yield
- Challenge – low palatability + high shade = risk of underuse

Best handled with high-density, short-duration impact. May require future mechanical suppression if grazing proves insufficient.

Management Strategy Pre-Graze

Target areas

- Prioritize browsing in the aspen thick zones (even if forage is lighter)
- Encourage movement through grassy, open patches for light grazing, trampling and manure

Animal Impact Approach

- 90-120 minute graze, ideally in cooler part of day (morning or post-rain if possible)
- Push animals into brushier zones – use mineral, salt block or lure feed as a draw to hard-to-hit areas.
- Let animals browse suckers

Grazing Day 1 – June 18, 17 sheep (including ewes, lambs, and rams), five alpacas. Storm watches out at 11 a.m.

Weather – Morning: 15°C, overcast, high humidity, storm watches issued by 11 a.m.; ground damp but firm with shaded canopy zones retaining more moisture. Afternoon: 17°C, light breeze, ground drying in open patches.

Pod Pre-Graze Assessment:

- Tree cover dominated by suckering aspen with dense understory.
- One small open grass area (6–10” grasses, early reproductive stage) and multiple dense brush zones.
- Litter layer – excellent natural mulch with high aspen leaf litter and good fungal activity.
- Bare soil – minimal; coverage 95%+ in most zones.
- Species noted – willow, cottonwood, alfalfa, dandelion, aspen saplings, clover, meadow rue, pea/legume, bedstraw, white yarrow, potentilla, alpine vetch, alpine strawberry, smooth brome, Kentucky bluegrass, wild rose.

Animal Distribution and Behaviour during graze

- spread-out flerd, grazing actively with heads down – lambs, ewes and alpacas all participating. They're –
    - Navigating mid-dense sucker zones
    - Not bunched, indicating comfort and good forage availability
    - Using open lanes and edges, a sign they're exploring but not stressed.

This is ideal behaviour. They're in browse-and-move mode rather than just hitting open patches.

- Moderate grass presence
- Aspen suckers visibly smaller; some trampled, some untouched
- Light browsing apparent
- Good opportunity for repeat graze later this summer or early fall if sucker regrowth is observed
- Some areas with high density of manure pellets = heavy impact zone

Monitor this area for bare soil exposure after rainfall – you may get algae crusting or compaction here, depending on hoof pressure and shade moisture retention.

- transitional zones, not heavily impacted yet, will benefit from residual trampling + post-rain nutrient cycling
- flerd is exhibiting solid adaptation to semi-wild/regenerative spaces
- good examples of both browsing and grazing behaviours captured

Post-Graze Observations Summary – June

- Impact – light to moderate; some manure concentration in high-traffic areas.
- Potential bare soil exposure risk in high-impact zones after rain – monitor for algae crusting or compaction.
- Soil/litter – litter intact; hoof impact light; no erosion risk observed.
- Utilization – ~25–35% overall; heavier in open patches, lighter in dense sapling zones.
- Future consideration – revisit in 60–75 days if sucker regrowth is strong; optional short second pass in grassier zones if weather stable.

Other Notes:

- flerd was overall calm and making good use of forage. Incoming storm fronts increased anxiety and caused some bunching at paddock gates; normal movement patterns resumed when skies cleared
- alpacas clearly preferred cottonwood bark and leaves
- sheep preferred areas with younger, more tender grasses. Were inclined to skip older, more mature/taller stands

Forage/Plant Species noted:

- willow
- cottonwood
- alfalfa
- dandelion
- aspen saplings

- clover
- meadow rue
- pea/legume
- bedstraw
- white yarrow
- potentilla
- alpine vetch
- alpine strawberry
- smooth brome
- Kentucky bluegrass
- Wild rose

Backside Pod Grazing Session 2 – August 5 – 6, 2025

Sessions – August 5 (4:00–6:00 p.m.) and August 6 (8:00–11:00 a.m., 4:00–5:00 p.m.).
Flerd – 17 sheep (including ewes, lambs, and rams) and 5 alpacas.
Weather – Aug 5: 19°C, sunny with light breeze; ground moist under canopy, firm in open zones. Aug 6 morning: 17°C, partly cloudy, drying in open slopes; afternoon: 20°C, warm with light wind.

Pod context

- Backside Pod Light to moderate regrowth observed, mix of open corridor grazing and aspen understory
- On north side of Backside Pod, a high density of aspen saplings, limited ground forage and thick canopy
- Grazing goals for this pod – aspen sapling pressure, brome utilization, pod clean up and soil-friendly impact

Grazing Timeline

August 5, 4 – 6 p.m.

- Flerd brought in at south end; began grazing willingly
- Brian was present for the first hour but then removed – minimal disruption
- Animals spread calmly and grazed lightly across shaded, woody areas and sunlit grass zones (south slope)

August 6, 8 – 11 a.m.

- Flerd grazed lightly, with moderate impact overall.
- Tallest, densest swards hold substantial standing mass and were likely avoided or lightly trampled but not grazed
- Thinner, sunlit or mid-canopy zones show clear signs of trampling, selective biting and movement pressure

- Understory species (ie white yarrow, thistle, alfalfa, bird's foot trefoil and smooth brome) have been partially browsed
    - Flock focused efforts on easier-to-browse areas, areas that are more open or familiar. Where grass was already knocked down or sparser, they showed more activity (possibly due to better sightlines in case of predators?)
    - Much of the mature canopy was left undisturbed
    - Minimal shrub browse on aspen saplings and wild rose

Flerd Behaviour and Movement Patterns for a.m. graze

Key Observations

- Paths and trampling radiate from the entry zone and along light corridors and open lanes
- minimal evidence of loafing or bedding down - they kept moving, likely due to Brian's presence
- the animals brought themselves in at 11 a.m. possibly due to heat, forage fatigue (high stem-to-leaf ratio) or Brian's pressure
- Inference from this grazing session –
    - The flerd functioned more like a browsing wave than as a settled graze
    - Brian dispersed them more than anchored them, especially in thicker zones
    - The flerd has retained forage discrimination – they're still being quite selective.

Sapling and Shrub Pressure (one of our stated goals for this pod)

- Saplings (especially aspen) remain largely untouched in denser stands. Most appear unbrowsed
- Wild rose patches show some signs of nibbling but not aggressively used
- No significant trampling pressure in heavier sapling zones – suggesting avoidance
- Inference –
    - If brush control is a priority, we may need another pass or
    - Mechanized control or
    - Possibly use Brian's presence to deter grazing from grassier slopes and concentrate it in the bush?
    - Suggest blocking access to already-used zones (Brian as a deterrent) or lures (salt, mineral or water) to bring activity into under-used areas

Grazing Notes from final 4 – 6 p.m. Graze* (Planned)

- Grazing was dispersed but deliberate. The sheep and alpacas were well-spaced but not scattered – calmly foraging indicating comfort and engagement.
- Wooded zones were actively used – managed to keep their attention focused into the trees and away from the clear and open slopes
- Minimal signs of bunching and avoidance.

Forage Utilization

- Plenty of standing grass remains: the upper canopy of the grasses is largely untouched so far, some nibbling nibbling happening below the seed head line
- Lushness under canopy: the understory of the aspen grove remains green and rich due to moisture and reduced sun exposure. *(target for higher pressure?)*
- Patchy pressure: some zones appear lighter in use while the central and southern strips show more consistent grazing

Other Observations

- No obvious signs of overgrazing
- Cottonwood leaf browsing
- No trampling mats visible yet

Sheep removed themselves after one hour of grazing.

Management Implications and Recommendations

- Short-term – To achieve brush control goals, direct animals into dense sapling areas using lures (salt, mineral, water) and block access to already-used grassy slopes.
- Medium-term – Consider a targeted late-summer or early-fall pass to hit underused sapling zones if regrowth allows.
- Alternative – If grazing pressure remains insufficient, plan for mechanical suppression in winter.
- Soil health – Maintain current litter cover; avoid excessive impact in shaded moist zones to prevent compaction.
- Rotation – Allow 60–75 days rest before next graze.