North Pod 2 Grazing Assessment August 9, 2025 complete

*This pod grazing session came after the June grazing session where all the north-side pods were combined. This is the first time this pod was grazed on its own.

Two sessions – from 8:15 a.m. to Noon and again from 4 p.m. until 5 p.m.
Flerd composition – 15 sheep (including lambs) and five alpacas
Weather/conditions – mild temps though fairly humid, firm ground, light breeze.
** History – this area was forestry mulched approx. 4 years ago and had manure spread on it last year

Pod Context:

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Pre-Graze Assessment

Vegetation Health:

- Forage abundance – the pod shows strong ground cover with a mix of fine grasses, brome and a high density of clover. Clover dominance indicates good nitrogen fixation and soil fertility but also suggests that some natives may be under-performing.
- Woody regrowth – scattered willow and cottonwood saplings indicate moderate browse opportunities for sheep and alpacas. Without periodic control (browsing where possible, mechanical where not) these species could gradually shade out the natives in wetter zones.
- Weeds/forbs – thistle presence in NW corner. Monitor.

- Ground disturbance – pocket gopher mounds are present but not widespread – this activity can be beneficial for soil aeration and organic matter cycling provided it doesn't lead to erosion
- Species diversity – the mix of legumes, grasses, woody species and scattered forbs suggests a moderate-to-high plant diversity for a reclaimed area. This range of species supports a range of grazing preferences and practices (alpacas browsing, sheep grazing and even horses), pollinators and soil health
- Habitat structure – multiple canopy layers (aspen/conifer overstory, shrub/sapling mid and herbaceous ground covers) create habitat for insects, birds, small mammals and larger wildlife ruminants (moose, deer).
- Wildlife activity – evidence of pocket gophers, insect pollinators (mosquitoes) and neighbouring cattle interactions point to an active ecological exchange

Soil and Forage Conditions:

- Manure application last fall and the visible vigor of the vegetation suggest nutrient cycling is healthy – far fewer mushrooms in this area than in the previous north-side pods, likely owing to a more open canopy
- Clover proliferation likely reflects both manure boost and soil nitrogen sufficiency – monitor to ensure clover doesn't crowd out the deeper-rooted native grasses
- Forestry mulching four years ago appears to have successfully prevented bare ground and invasive dominance (though some XXX and Canada Thistle was noted). Also note some small patches of denser woody debris post-mulching is still not fully decomposed. This is a well-established stand for its age.

Overall health rating:

- Condition is classed as GOOD
- Biodiversity markers are moderate to high
- Resilience appears strong if grazing is managed to prevent overuse of clover and woody regrowth is kept in check

Morning Session:

Focus – broad use of pod, including open grass zones and partial canopy cover
Behaviour:

- Moderate grazing of grasses in open zones
- Clover targeted early and consumed where found
- Aspen saplings browsed lightly to moderately

Impact:

- Light to moderate overall
- Most grass stands retain 60-80 per cent of original height
- No excessive trampling noticed, movement generally dispersed

Forage Utilization:

- Moderate grazing pressure overall with noticeable impact in open meadow zones (predominantly trampled rather than grazed)
- Clover patches in sunny areas cropped low; fine grasses grazed very selectively with heavier stems untouched
- Aspen saplings lightly-to-moderately browsed, particularly in open sunny patches
- Woody browse along edges (willow and cottonwood) nipped but not heavily browsed

Conditions Post-Graze:

- Open meadow sections show flattened grass from movement
- Shadier understory retain more standing forage – possible lower palatability? Also mosquito presence
- Gopher mounds untrampled
- Thistle presence unchanged

Other Observations:

- Neighbouring cows (breeding group with cow/calf pairs and a bull) caused some disruption – Clio gradually settled but Brian needed to be removed
    - Alpacas gave alarm calls which caused a minor stampede as everyone got used to the cows being there
- Heavy mosquito activity
- Neighbouring pasture is very short due to heavy stocking rate with a much smaller range of plant species. Monitor for erosion/weed incursions.

Afternoon Session:

Targeting the treed areas and understory previously lightly grazed/browsed.

- Strong willow presence – healthy, leafy and tasty
- Abundant finer grasses under tree canopy – lush and relatively upright from limited impact earlier
- Some open-edged zones with mixed grasses and taller/coarser grass appear less targeted so far
- Nutritional profile – willow browse is high in protein and mineral-dense, a good supplement for grasses; fine grasses under trees appear young and more tender compared to more mature stems in the open area which suggests higher energy values.
- Watching carefully for face height relative to the sward – aim for faces to stay at mid-canopy level on willows or mid-way up grass stems.
- Ensured that sheep who revisited previously moderately-impacted areas were moved along (NW corner). Made sure that at no point were sheep running, maintained even, relaxed pressure when movement was required
- Watching for movement rather than animal staying in one place and eating down to the ground
- Indications of heavy (rather than moderate) use include –
    - Noses within 1 -2 inches of the ground

    - Bites include lower stem bases or crown material
    - Animals revisiting already-bitten plants, particularly clover, for additional bites
- Aiming for 30-40 per cent reduction of grasses taken down to half their height under the trees – approx. 45 min - 1 hour of grazing time.

After 1 hour, Visual Impact Assessment:

- Visual forage change is minimal across the pod – light utilization overall.
- Clover patches show the most visible impacts; grasses under canopy appear largely intact.
- Aspen saplings lightly to moderately browsed; woody structure remains
- No signs of overgrazing or trampling damage
- Utilization Estimates – Clover ~35% leaf removal (afternoon), grasses under canopy ~15–20%, aspen saplings ~20–25%.

Final Notes:

- No visible bare patches beyond small hoof scuffs – litter cover remains intact and erosion risk is low
- Grass matting will aid in moisture retention and feed soil microbes as it decomposes, especially under current high-moisture conditions.
- Recovery outlook – given the light/moderate grazing pressure and high moisture this season, regrowth should be fairly quick, likely within 25-35 days for grasses, woody regrowth approximately the same – potential for grazing again in 45-60 days.
- Consider letting the horses into these areas for a couple of hours and observe to see if they break up the thatched grasses
    - Heavier hooves and less-selective grazing will press down and break up the grassy thatch that sheep tend to avoid
    - Trampling helps incorporate litter into the soil surface, speeding decomposition and nutrient cycling
    - Diverse forage utilization – horses will take coarser grasses that sheep have left, especially mature stems and seedheads which can prevent them going rank
        - This reduces shading over clover and other low-growing forbs, improving light penetration for regrowth
    - Pest and disease cycle disruption
        - Different grazing species disrupt parasite lifecycles because most internal parasites are host-specific
        - Manure introduces different microbial activity which can improve biodiversity in the soil
    - Start at Backside pod and, as much as infrastructure will allow, cycle through to the final pod in the same order as the sheep
        - Aim for 30-60 minutes
        - Avoid wet days to prevent compaction and root damage
        - Keep numbers tight enough that horses move steadily

- CAUTIONS: watch for areas with delicate regrowth (ie clover, young forbs); avoid making use of the same paths wherever possible and shift entry/exits to spread trampling benefits