

Dairy Pipeline

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Greener pastures

Most people welcome the opportunity to move on to "greener pastures"; so do cattle. To them, the lush green grass, the fresh air, the warm sunshine and the freedom to kick up their heels, is a welcome reprieve from the humdrum life of being penned up for the winter, from living on a ration of stored forages, and from the stress of hard concrete surfaces.

These spring pastures can serve as a tonic to cattle, helping to restore their systems back to normal. The young, lush growth is high in digestible energy, protein and minerals.

When cattle consume large amounts of high quality pasture in the young, vegetative state of growth, they may need only moderate levels of grain — perhaps as little as one pound of concentrate per five to six pounds of milk, and the protein content may be able to be reduced slightly.

As grasses approach the head stage of maturity and legumes, the early bud stage, quality declines; grain feeding and protein supplementation may have to be

returned to near previous levels

Feeding excess grain to cattle on lush pastures can cause scouring and reduce fat tests, as a result of lowered fiber intakes. Supplemental feeding of some stored forages can help prevent these problems. Supplemental feeding also helps prevent weed poisoning. Weeds are generally the first things to start growing in spring and the last thing to be affected by summer droughts.

Fortunately, most of these toxic weeds are unpalatable, and cattle have the good sense to avoid them. But, when grass is short and if no other supplemental feeds are offered, cattle may be forced to turn to these weeds to satisfy their hunger. To help prevent bloat, let the dew burn off legumes and feed some stored forages before turning cows out to pasture.

Manage for production

Many pastures have the potential to be more productive. They can become much more than an exercise lot and a weed bed; they can become a valuable source of feed nutrients.

Liming, fertilizing, rotational

grazing and periodic clipping is one of the easiest and surest ways I know of to bring a run-down pasture back to life. I would try this route before tearing up the old pasture and reseeding it; it's cheaper and the risks of seeding failure and soil erosion are less.

Most of these neglected pastures have sufficient amounts of good grass seed in the soil, just waiting for an opportunity to thrive.

Once the seed does germinate, the grass has to be given a chance to thrive. Here is where rotational grazing can help. Divide the pastures into several different paddocks. Graze one for a few days and then rotate the herd to another. This gives grasses and legumes a chance to recover without being stressed by continual grazing and trampling pressures. It also helps prevent cows from grazing selectively.

When dividing a pasture into paddocks, consider accessibility to each paddock and cow's needs for shade and water.

Once cows have grazed a paddock and moved to another, the grazed paddock can be clipped. This helps to control weed growth and it helps keep the pasture young and vegetative. Young, vegetative grasses are more nutritious and more productive than mature grasses.

Once grass is allowed to mature and go to seed, it thinks its job is done for the season; clipping keeps the grass from maturing and fools it into making continued growth. The cutter bar of the mower will also help distribute cow "droppings." This should help to reduce parasite pressures; greater exposure to sunlight and the absence of cows should also help control parasites.

To sustain continued growth, pastures need to be limed and fertilized. A safe time to fertilize a pasture is after it has been grazed

and the herd moved into another paddock; there is less danger of fertilizer toxicity to the herd.

If clipping alone does not control weeds, consider using a herbicide. Banvel in combination with 2,4-D will kill a wide variety of pasture weeds.

Spray when the weather is warm and moist, and when the weeds are growing actively — soon after a paddock has been grazed and a few weeks before the herd is scheduled to be returned to the paddock. Many pastures and exercise areas are starting to be over-run by a thorny, bushy type of red root pigweed. This spray program should control this weed if the weeds are sprayed at an early stage of growth.

A word of caution: it will also kill legumes.

Renovation

What if your pastures do not respond to these suggestions? Or, what if you do not have the right kind of pasture grasses and legumes for a productive, nutritious pasture? Then what?

If this is your situation, you haven't lost much, if anything, in trying the previous suggestions. You may need a complete pasture renovation, and the previous practices will help set the stage for a successful renovation; they will help you to build up a good base of fertility and will help you to control problem weeds before seeding time.

If complete renovation is needed, aim for a late summer seeding, providing soil moisture is sufficient for good germination. Seeding around September gives the new sod a chance to become established before the onset of hot, dry summer months, and many of the annual weeds which compete with the new seeding will be killed by frost. The next best time for seeding is very early in spring.

If pastures are divided into several paddocks, you have a better opportunity to renovate one paddock, while grazing the remainder paddocks.

The quality of many grass pastures can be improved by adding legumes. This can be accomplished by sod seeding (no-tilling) legumes into the established sod. If this is contemplated, concentrate on building up soil pH and phosphorus levels and controlling persistent broadleaf weed problems well before seeding time.

Restrict Grazing

To protect newly seeded pastures, restrict grazing for the first year, and especially when soils are wet.

Don't turn your pasture into an exercise lot. If pasture acreage is limited, consider fencing off a small area close to the barn for use as an exercise lot; chances are, it will support no sod growth.

Then, control the herd's grazing habits on the remaining limited acreage; let cows graze only if there is something there to graze — and perhaps only at night.

This will help you get maximum production from those few acres

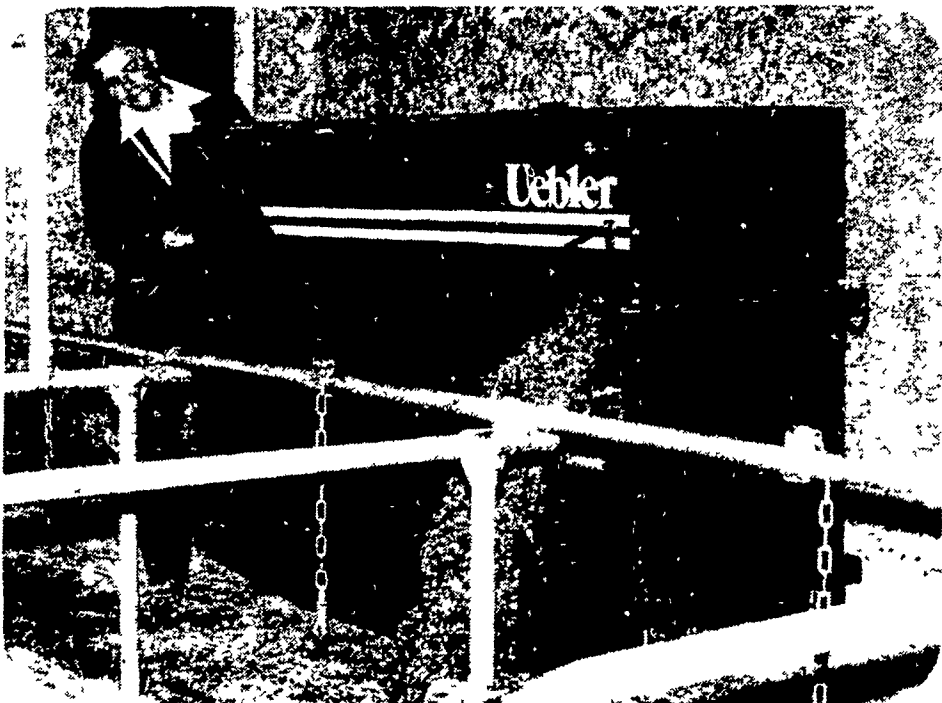
We used to think of pastures as expensive sources of feed. This may still be the case. But, if we already have fenced off acreage, chances are we can get additional feed nutrients with little extra expense; it's worth considering in these days of rising costs of feed and energy.

If pastures can provide your herd with fresh air, a reprieve from concrete stress, some fresh forage for a few weeks; and if this results in better herd health, increased production and improved overall performance, they suddenly become more profitable and deserve the best of management.

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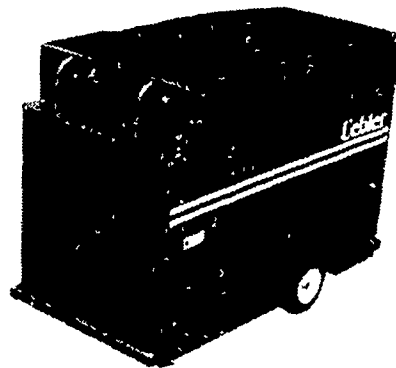
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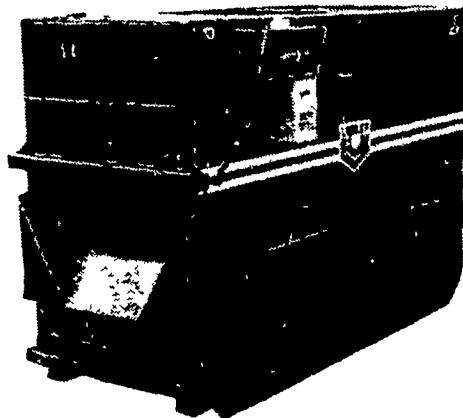


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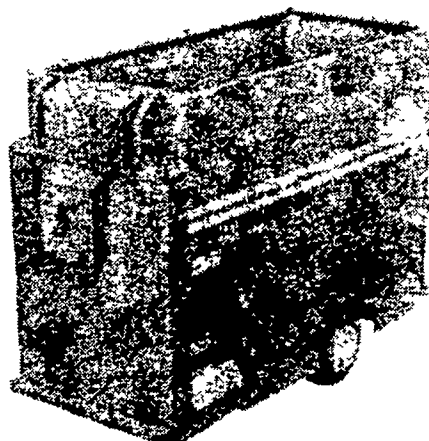


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