

Foraging Around



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Pasture Improvement: How Far Should We Go?

Pasture improvement is getting lots of attention these days. For example, last December Vermont agronomist Bill Murphy, a strong proponent of intensive grazing management in that state, was the keynote speaker at the annual forage conferences of the Maryland-Delaware Forage

Council. Pasture Economics and Pasture Efficiency were two of the main topics at the January meeting of the New York Forage and Grassland Council. And *Intensive Grazing* was the theme of a recent one-day workshop at Harrisburg sponsored by Extension and the Soil Conservation

Service.

And, of course, the Pennsylvania Forage and Grassland Council has highlighted various aspects of pasture improvement at each of its last three major conferences.

Is all of this attention justified? First of all, remember that since biblical times pasture has been the foundation of grassland farming. And even today, in terms of worldwide feeding systems for cattle, well over 80 percent of the cattle are grazed for their entire life. And all of the evidence suggests we're seeing a swing back towards better pasture systems in the Northeast.

Economics of Pasture are Favorable

We've always maintained that properly managed pastures can be one of our least expensive sources of feed. At the New York meeting SCS ag economist Phil Teague presented some new data to support this claim. Teague interviewed a number of New York dairymen who during the past two years had adopted some form of more intensive rotational grazing on their farms. These were not small dairymen. Most herds ranged from 40 to 100 lactating cows averaging 15,000 to 17,000 pounds of milk; several breeds were represented.

In brief, here's what Teague reported. Use of improved grazing systems resulted in more nutritive value from the pasture, both in terms of dry matter intake and levels of protein and net energy. This resulted in reduced purchases of feed grains and hay, and in one case the expansion of the herd. Net benefits varied considerably, of course, but several farmers reported net benefits per acre and per cow well over \$100 and in several cases nearly \$200. And while it couldn't be measured, dairymen generally reported improved herd health when cows were on pasture.

Increased fencing was, of course, one of the major new expenses. "But," says Teague, "the data showed that in all cases the fencing and other costs associated with converting to a rotational grazing system were more than recovered during the first year."

Fencing No Longer the Problem

In years past fencing, both cost and maintenance, was one of the major limitations in switching to intensive pasture systems. However, new concepts in fencing based on New Zealand findings using relatively low cost electric

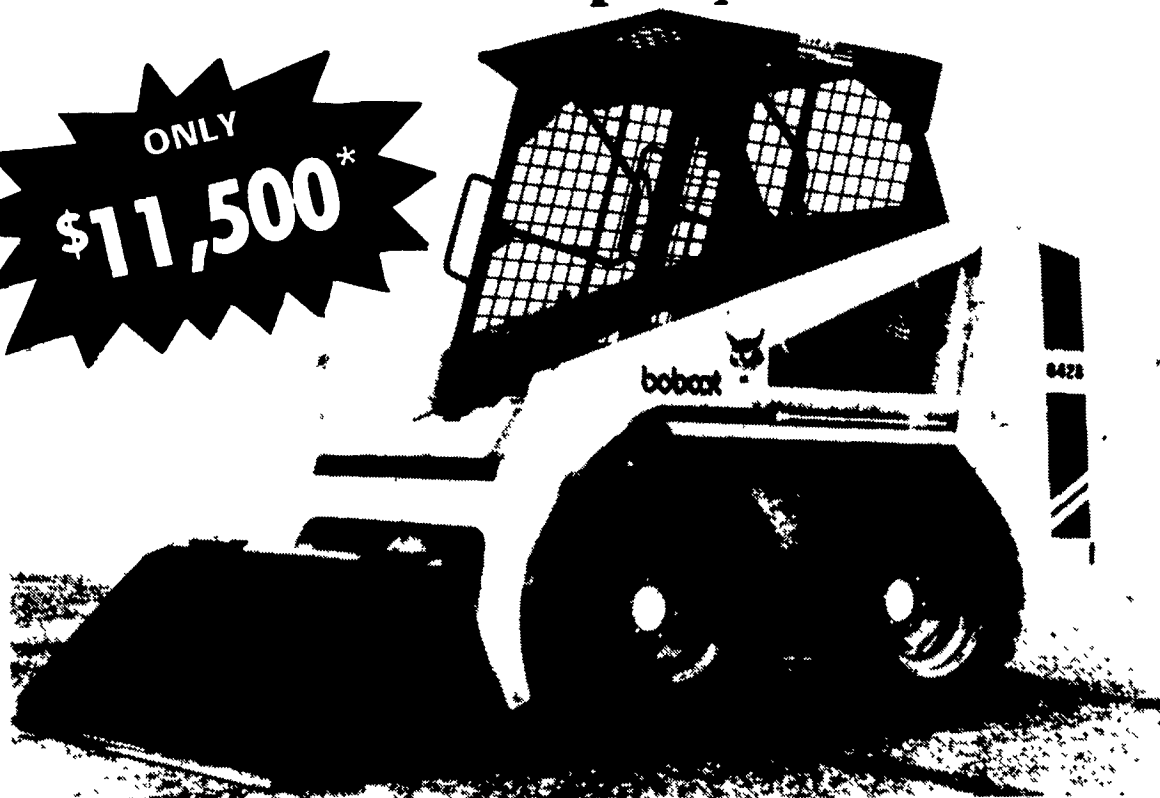
fencing materials are making intensive pasture management systems both feasible and practical. These newer fences are designed to output high voltage at low current and have been shown to be both safe and effective for both cross-fencing and perimeter fencing.

Much of the recent emphasis on pasture improvement has dealt with the more intensive use of already established pastures. But there's also lots of opportunities for upgrading your pasture system through the establishment of more productive and palatable tall growing grasses and legumes. Next month I'll take another critical look with you at the potential of reeds canarygrass and tall fescue. In later columns I'll bring you up to date on warm-season grasses and where they may fit in your program.

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