

What! Back To Pasture? An Economical Way

Editor's Note: The following article is the first of several on pasturing prepared by Alton Homan. Homan has drawn much of his information from the 1989-90 Agronomy Guide. Homan is the Bradford County Extension Agent on soils, crops and plants.

Slightly over 20 years ago I prepared a series of newsletters on pasture and pasture management and expounded on the merits. At the time, the series received some criticism as farmers were moving rapidly into hauling all forage to the livestock.

Now, the seemingly brand new concept of pasture has returned to the minds of many and they are searching for information. Let me be the first to say that there is a reason for renewed interest. Most of the old benefits and disadvantages are still prevalent, but the economics (\$\$\$) of pasture systems has become much more favorable largely due to the new fencing technology in relatively recent years. The time was right, as milk prices slipped, dairymen looked for lower cost, high quality forage.

Before getting involved too deeply, a few things to consider and not in order of importance or all inclusive are: if you have a full line of good forage equipment that may become obsolete and be used only on a small part of acreage (which would increase your actual cost per acre of use) can you afford to make an additional expenditure for fencing and the labor in erecting and moving fences.

Do you have the shade and water to maintain milk production available in the pasture (what do you gain if you lower cost, but also lower production)? These are some typical questions to consider.

Pasture Management

A well-managed pasture program can often be the most economical way to provide forage to ruminant animals. It is estimated that on many dairy farms where pasture makes up a significant portion of the forage program, feed costs are reduced by \$.50 to \$1.00 per day per cow during the grazing season.

However, to optimize the production and utilization of pasture, as well as animal performance, careful planning and sound management are important. Knowing your animals, plants and soils, and being able to respond to their needs is a skill that must be developed if pasture is going to make up a significant portion of your forage program.

Pasture Systems

Developing a pasture system that utilizes your land resources and fits in with your total animal, forage and crop program is an important first step in pasture management. A major goal in pasture management is to provide quality pasture for the grazing animals throughout the grazing season. By utilizing the various growth patterns of the many pasture species grown in Pennsylvania, the grazing season can potentially last from April to December.

Summer Annual Grasses

Grown in rotation with other crops, summer annual grasses such as sudangrass and sudangrass hybrids can provide supplemental summer grazing.

Small Grains

Small grains such as oats, rye, wheat, or triticale can provide late fall and early spring grazing.

Brassicas

Various Brassica species have been shown to be useful as special purpose pasture crops in well-designed pasture systems. Spring seeded brassicas can provide supplemental summer grazing. Summer seeded brassicas can provide late fall grazing.

Deferred Or Stockpiled Pasture

This practice leaves areas of pasture ungrazed during certain seasons to accumulate forage for grazing needed when pasture production is not sufficient to maintain the herd or flock. For example, some forages, such as birdsfoot trefoil or crownvetch, can be "stockpiled" in the spring to be grazed during the summer slump in pasture production. Other for-

ages, such as tall fescue, may be stockpiled in late summer and autumn for late autumn and winter grazing. In this way grazing is available during seasons when low productivity of pastures might force the producer to sell cattle or feed hay.

Other Resources

Other forage resources, such as corn stalks grazed after harvest, and the use of aftermath hay, can be planned into a full season grazing program.

Designing A Pasture System

After considering which pasture components to use and which species to grow, it is important to calculate the animal forage requirements of the herd or flock. Dry

Table 83 Suggested pasture components for different grazing purposes (numbers do not indicate preference)

	April-May	June-August	September-October	November-January ¹
Beef cows (calved in March)	1. Any of the cool-season grasses, preferably with legume (white clover, red clover)	1. Warm-season grasses 2. All cool-season ² grasses with nitrogen fertilizer or legume (alfalfa, red clover)	1. Cool-season grasses with or without legume 2. Stockpile tall fescue for later grazing	1. Stockpiled tall fescue a. Nitrogen fertilized b. Mixture with alfalfa, red clover, or trefoil 2. Corn stover fields
March calves	1. Graze with dams.	1. Graze with dams; creep graze on grass-legume mixes, perennial ryegrass, or Brassica crops.	As in June-August	Sell as feeders or handle as stockers as below
Yearling steers and heifers (stockers)	1. Graze cool-season grass-legume pastures 2. Top-graze pastures ahead of cows and calves in rotation.	1. Stockpiled birdsfoot trefoil 2. Warm-season annuals 3. Cool-season grass-legume pastures (except tall fescue) 4. Top-graze ahead of cows and calves for rapid gains.	1. Cool-season grass-legume pastures (may need grain to fatten) 2. Brassica crops	1. Stockpiled tall fescue a. Nitrogen fertilized b. Mixture with alfalfa, red clover, or trefoil 2. Late-seeded Brassicas
Lactating dairy cows	1. Cool-season grass-legume mixes perennial ryegrass, timothy, bromegrass.	Top-graze same species as in spring.	1. Top-graze as in summer. 2. Spring-seeded brassicas	Late-seeded Brassicas
Dry dairy cows, replacement heifers	Graze cool-season grass, grass-legume mixtures. Some silage supplementation may be necessary.			

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