# Beef Briefs

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### MAKING ROTATIONAL GRAZING WORK

The concept of intensive pasture management through frequent rotations in a pasture has become an important management practice in beef production.

This is particularly true for cow-calf herds since it has been shown that this type of pasture management will help reduce the need for stored feed, will improve the nutritional value of a pasture, and will help reduce feed costs for the cow herd. It is, however, dependent on careful planning and management if it is to be successful.

The basic concept of "intensive grazing" is that the cattle will graze all of the available forage in a given area in a short period of time before being moved to new standing forage. Complete grazing and timely movement are essential to success.

The complete removal of growth inhibits selective grazing. There will be no competitive advantage of one plant compared to another; thus, more desirable species like grasses and legumes will not have to compete with weeds and undesirable growth.

Secondly, timely movement will allow for an appropriate "rest period" to allow regrowth of the desirable forage. Most Pennsylvania pastures are primarily cool-season grasses — orchardgrass, brome, bluegrass, fescue, etc. These forages also will respond well to rotational management, particularly if they also contain some legumes. However, they also present some distinct management problems since they have varying rates of growth during a given grazing season (maximized in spring and fall).

How does the manager capture the growth of these plants? The first method is through variable stocking rates. Many producers want to maintain the same stocking rate on a pasture for a season. This implies a given rate may be too low during periods of fast growth, or be too high during slow growth — such as mid-summer for cool season grasses. By doubling or tripling stocking rate in May and early June, the cattle are able to harvest the grass at an optimum feed value. When there are not enough cattle and the grass "gets ahead of you," the quality will be diminished.

Second, reduce the acreage available to graze and remove the excess mechanically. Spring and early summer rest periods for most cool season grasses can be reduced to 12-15 days in many cases. This is about ⅓ to ½ of what the acreage rest period would be for the season. Therefore, up to one-half of the pasture can be harvested mechanically. The regrowth is returned to pasture when growth slows down in mid-summer.

Third, use variable pasture species. Cool season grasses are poorly adapted to mid-summer and late fall grazing. Incorporation of species that are more adaptable at these periods can help extend the grazing season. For mid-summer grazing, warm-season grasses and summer annuals can be used as part of the pasture.

Alfalfa also works well in a pasture system if it properly managed. Bloat can be prevented and the alfalfa stand can be retained for several years with proper grazing management.

Two alternatives for fall grazing include brassicas and stockpiled grasses. Good fertility and seeding are necessary for brassicas to do well, but they can certainly contribute to extended fall grazing.

Fescue may be the best choice for stockpiling. New varieties of endophyte-free fescue have had excellent success, and can be grazed well into winter months.

Getting the most from a pasture is like typing to hit a moving target. However, careful planning can contribute to lower cost, successful use of pasture.

Make it Milk