Grazing Livestock 300 Days Every Year

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Over the past 20 years, US livestock producers have adopted many grazing management principles practiced in New Zealand, Ireland and other locations. The "discovery" of these practices has had a profound influence on livestock farming here, resulting in higher stocking rates, better forage management and lower feeding costs. Length of growing season, however, is a significant difference between Pennsylvania and many other areas. To fully exploit management practices from other locations, they must be refined to address environmental conditions specific to Pennsylvania.

Length of growing season and use of multiple forage species provides both advantages and limitations to successful grazing. With few exceptions, the cost of production will be reduced by extending the grazing season as long as possible.

The reasons for cost savings include:

1 There is no harvesting cost when the animal harvests the feed itself,

2 The only overhead cost we will have is portable fences and fertilizer;

3. There is no machinery cost,

4. There is no feeding or storage loss of nutritive value of the forage;

5. There is a significantly reduced labor cost;

6. There is less animal concentration, manure handling, and potentially fewer diseases.

To determine if a grazing system could be developed to extend the grazing season in our environment to 300 days per year, from a present average of 200 days, the beef cattle research group at Penn State designed an experiment. Here are a few of the results of that study:

* A planned and coordinated grazing program will require several forage species. Not surprisingly, the greatest need for non-traditional forages was in midsummer (when conventional cool season species are least productive) and when growth has stopped but there is little or no snow cover. For midseason grazing we tried brassicas (rape), annual grasses (sudangrass and its hybrids), and alfalfa/grass combinations. In our comparisons, it was evident the alfalfa/grass combinations worked best for us and probably at the least cost. The varieties do not come without problems. Bloat must be managed with poloxalene blocks, and fertility and grazing management must be kept at a high level to retain the alfalfa in the stand.

For grazing in fall and winter, some grass must be stockpiled. The species of choice for stockpiling is endophyte-free varieties of fescue. This part of the grazing program requires significant management experience because the land base necessary to stockpile grass and effectively extend the grazing season must be determined on an individual-farm basis. Adding the use of corn grain crop aftermath grazing in the fall for spring-calving animals can be very helpful Corn crop residue is an effective feed source for these animals, and, when properly managed for grazing with portable fences, can provide an average of about 25 days for each animal unit (1000 pound of grazing animal) per acre.

* A more unconventional approach to harvesting and feeding forages is needed. Producers may need to quit baling hay on their own farms and purchase it. There are two reasons for this: 1) the cost of owning and operating haying equipment for producers with small herds and flocks is prohibitive to reducing feed costs; and (2) we may make more profitable use of the land we now drive over by allowing cows to graze it instead.

* A planned rotational grazing program must be in place. The high cost in a grazing program is land, so it is imperative to graze as many animals over the available land as possible. The best way to increase stocking rates is by rotationally grazing pastures which allows the forage to be managed. A planned program is one which maximizes the growth of quality forages for an entire grazing season. Excellent management of grass growth is the key to success of a rotational grazing system.

* Some unconventional steps are needed to manage grass and extend grazing. An example of this is feeding hay in August in a good year so the stockpiled grass can grow, or bushhogging paddocks in April and May so the grass remains vegetative longer into the summer. Your more conventional neighbors may question your sanity, but remind them of it when they are fighting mud and cold when feeding hay in December while your cows are out grazing!

* The livestock enterprise must be viewed as a means of using grass we produce. To be most efficient at producing and using grass, the whole farm must becomes the production unit, losing the labels of "hay ground, summer pasture, wintering lots, etc." Land and facilities resources need to be effectively pieced together with the single goal of extending the grazing season most profitably. Lower cost should to drive these decisions, meaning there may be fewer animals on the farm. However, with a lower cost of production, profitability may be greater.

* Livestock can be grazed effectively for 300 days in Pennsylvania if we use grazing and land management principles that, while sometimes unconventional, are based on lower production costs and higher profitability.

Every farm is different, so every grazing program will also be different. However, there is evidence to show that management and informed decisions by livestock producers in Pennsylvania can reduce production costs and extend the grazing season.

Organic Farm Meeting Feb. 17

KUTZTOWN (Berks Co.)–Production, networking, and marketing are all needs of most farm producers, especially new or transitional organic farmers. Experienced organic farmers may have insight and leadership skills to share. A meeting will be held to help determine what these educational needs are. The meeting is being organized by a group of Penn State extension agents in southeast Pennsylvania.

"Organic Farm Production Education in Southeast Pennsylvania: Is There A Need?" will be Feb. 17 from 7:30 p.m.-9 p.m. at Kutztown University in the "Old Main" Building (Blue Room).

Farmers who are considering organic production, are transitional, or certified organic are welcome to attend. Participants are asked to bring a certified organic snack to share. There is no charge to attend.

Participants are asked to pre-register with Penn State Cooperative Extension–Berks County by Feb. 11 at (610) 378-1327, fax (610) 378-7961, e-mail: Berks Ext@psu.edu.