PFGC ♦ PRESIDENT'S CORNER ♦

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balanced cropping program can help keep your paddocks producing a crop most of the year. Any field that the herd can walk to within a mile should be considered for grazing.

The backbone crop for pasture systems is cool season grasses mixed with clovers. I personally prefer the perennial ryegrass, orchardgrass, and clover mixtures as the base program. Perennial ryegrass is fast-establishing and its quality is great. However, it falls short on summer productivity during dry hotter weather. Orchardgrass is long lived if managed properly and takes the extremes better. The clovers add quality, nitrogen fixation, and summer yields. The forage species need to fit your situation, however, as your soils and management may be suited to other species.

To supplement the summer slump and renovate worn pasture, consider planting warm season annuals such as BMR (brown midrib) sorghum sudans. A basic guide for the first time you grow this crop is: don't put out more than one acre for every 10 cows unless you are prepared to make stored forage.

Winter active crops such as Italian ryegrass, annual ryegrass, and small grains can also be used to stretch the grazing months. They can also be easily double-cropped with the warm season annuals.

The Land Base is critical for making the system work. If too little pasture is available and the paddocks are abused, than it may be better to keep the cows in the barn and bring the feed to the cows. An adequate Land Base also depends on management. If cows are only turned out six to 10 hours a day and fed lots in the barn, you may get by with as little as ¼ acres per cow. If you plan to turn the cows out most of the day, ½ to a little over 1 acre per cow is needed depending on how much stored forage is fed.

Soil type, drainage, and fertility can also affect the Land Base required. High-producing pastures require good soil fertility. Good grazing management in combination with a soil program will increase soil organic matter which improves dry weather productivity and decreases wet weather damage. Stocking rates can be increased, or supplemental feeding decreased, as soil productivity increases.

The Cow obviously is critical to grazing. Remember she is the worker and you are the boss sending her to the right fields with lots of high quality forage for her to turn into milk. A good grazing cow is a mobile eating machine. She requires good feet and legs since she is required to walk as far as a mile to paddocks and, during the act of grazing, she is walking slowly, swinging her head back and forth. Probably the ideal grazing cow is around 1,000 pounds in weight. Big cows tend not to do as well. Jerseys and Jersey crosses perform well but there are many other breeds that have potential, including the cows in your own herd. Holsteins can also be very good grazers, but hot weather is not their strong point and there is a higher percentage of what I call "TMR queens" in most Holstein herds. Over time cows that are not good grazers will be culled out of the system.

The Manager: You hold the keys to success. Learn about the system before leaping by attending pasture walks, meetings, reading grazing papers such as Graze, and learning from successful neighbors. But just like swimming, eventually you have to jump in and really find out for yourself. There are a growing number of support people in the universities, governmental organizations, and private industry that have solid experience. Use them and experienced graziers to your benefit. You don't have to learn everything the hard way. Grazing requires daily management and flexible forward planning. Instead of chasing The Crop to the cows your are chasing the cows to The Crop. A successful manager is planning forward for today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year and beyond. Grazing is very similar to the game of chess. A lot of moves must be made to succeed, but there are many ways to succeed.

The success of a grazing system is up to the manager to make it happen. For many it is an enjoyable way of farming. Research it and give it a try. You may enjoy putting the pieces of the puzzle together and the daily game of grazing chess. It does not cost much to try, and if you don't like it move on to something else. If you are just starting, remember that livestock makes the money — not barns, silos, and equipment. Keep these costs as low as possible. But don't shoot yourself in the foot by cutting out profit makers.