



Consider Rotational Grazing

by Curt Olson

If corn prices have you concerned, take another look at your grazing system to see if there are some things you can do to find a little more forage in your pastures. Many experts say that rotational grazing delivers benefits ranging from better forage to more forage consumed from the same plot of land. It also may allow producers to stockpile forage for use later in the year. Properly managed, it may increase your carrying capacity.

Rotational grazing simply divides a larger pasture into smaller cells or paddocks, and the cattle are rotated through, taking care not to overgraze any section.

“The idea here is that you’d like the animals to graze an area for no more than five to seven days, and then let that area recover for about 28 to 40 days after it has been grazed,” writes Ron Lemenager, an Extension beef specialist at Purdue University.

Others may say that the grass should be grazed to a specific height before moving the cattle. The goal is to use the paddock efficiently, not over-graze it and water placement will play a role in that. Lemenager says that it should be within 800 feet of the farthest point in the pasture. If the distance to water is greater than that, it increases the likelihood that parts of the pasture may go underutilized.

In a large pasture that isn’t sectioned off, cattle roam freely and pick and choose what to eat. Typically, the younger, more lush forage — the good stuff — is the first to go, while mature forage nearby may be completely

ignored and stand uneaten. A rotational system forces the cattle to better harvest the available forage in a smaller area rather than pick and choose. Then the cattle are moved to rest that area and allow it to regrow. If everything works, including the weather, producers should be able to use this early in the season and then later in the year. Lemenager notes that a forage quantity equal to ½ of the original grazed area may be available again.

For producers switching to rotational grazing, Lemenager says start by splitting a pasture in half with a single strand of electric wire attached to fence posts at the end and held up with fiberglass poles. Split those sections one more time and you have four paddocks. He recommends a forage mix of 50% to 70% grass, with legumes making up the balance.

Soil tests will help determine if the field needs fertilizer. George Rehm and Ryon Walker reported on a 2005 University of Minnesota test of a fertilized, rotationally grazed field vs. a non-fertilized, continuously grazed field.

One pasture was divided into four fenced paddocks by electric fence and fertilized according to University of Minnesota guidelines — 60 pounds nitrogen, 30 pounds phosphorous, and 90 pounds potassium per acre at a cost of \$40 per acre. A watering system was installed. This pasture consisted of 41.5 acres. For comparison, a non-fertilized, continuously grazed 400-acre pasture without

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When Grass Is Scarce

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Using forage to add weight is a sound strategy unless you don’t have any forage, which is a problem across the drought-plagued Southeast.

“We’ve been there before but in the previous times you had things to supplement the poor forages with,” says Dr. Ronnie Silcox, Extension beef cattle specialist for the University of Georgia. “Now we’re getting hit from both sides with expensive forages and expensive supplements. We’re looking at any alternative feeds we can but the value of alternative feeds are linked to the value of traditional feeds. As the price of corn goes up, the price of all the byproduct feeds goes up.”

In south Georgia, peanut hay was baled this year and is being used as a feed replacement. The alfalfa hay supply is short and expensive. Producers are more efficient feeding the hay they have and focused on which animals they cull so they can afford to feed the ones

they keep. Silcox says that efficiency in all phases of the operation are important.

“Looking at this more from a long-term view, I do think if we can get back in more normal weather patterns, the stock growing business is going to look a whole lot better,” he says.

“Running cattle on pasture longer does make a lot of sense.”

It also costs more to fertilize pastures than in the past. The price of nitrogen fertilizer has gone up with the price of oil.

“With the markets sitting where they are, you’ve got to be efficient in what you’re doing and look at a lot of alternatives you haven’t used before,” Silcox says. “If you look at the amount of corn that’s supposed to go into ethanol in the future, we’re going to continue to see high-priced feedgrains. That extra couple hundred pounds fed with forage could get to be more important. We just need some water to do that.”