

*Manage grass
with beef in mind*



Take half, leave half to recharge the pasture resource. That's how to build forage resources over a season and over the years. We should be equally concerned about building demand for the product derived from these resources.

Many excellent farm and ranch managers rarely think of themselves as beef producers. Rather, they are range stewards or grass farmers. Cattle type, if considered at all, may be limited to the class descriptions of cow-calf pairs or stockers.

Cattle are merely a harvesting tool in this "paradigm," or view of how things work. Some grazing animals must be managed so that the forage created by chlorophyll, sunlight and water can be converted to cash that will pay operating expenses, with profit for living. Might as well use cattle, right?

For more profit potential, expand the paradigm to include using cattle that produce premium value beef. If you have long-term plans to harvest forage with cattle, it's in your best interest to support the underlying market for beef.

Beginning producers may hear about "grass-fed beef" and consider that as a target market. Keep in mind, however, this is a niche for a very small fraction of North American consumer demand. Some niche veterans are quite successful, but it's not a good idea for most producers to aim there unless you have all the processing and sales

steps in place many months in advance. In nearly all cases, your grass cattle will end up grain finished.

Long-time graziers and pasture managers have traditionally dealt with cattle as a commodity. Lately, you may have noticed quality either getting better or worse—there are fewer “average” performing cattle. Genetic improvement has most of the top end in performance ability going directly to grain feedlots after weaning. Tail-enders are made available for stockers as grass yearlings.

That puts a dark cloud over plans to convert sunshine to cash. If this is starting to affect your operation, consider making some adjustments. We’ve heard of some innovative stocker programs that weigh individuals and cull low-end performers twice before retaining ownership of the top 80%. Cattle will always need grass—it’s just a question of which cattle, when, and who owns them.

It may seem risky to get into quality cattle, especially at this stage of the cattle cycle. But ownership of poor quality cattle can carry even more risk. An alternative to owning cattle is to establish mutually beneficial alliances with feedlots, registered breeders and well-established quality beef producers who are looking to expand.

You could run somebody’s registered heifers on those pastures as easily as commodity feeders, and earn a guaranteed price per head per day. That kind of interdependent networking will serve you and your grass resource well into the future.

Some cow-calf-yearling producers who made steady progress on weaning weights over the years looked up one fall day to find their yearlings were coming off grass at 900 to 1,000 lb. They still needed 100 days on feed to have a shot at grading, but it was getting too late to maximize their beef value.

Find out more about the cattle you're grazing. You wouldn't run hay equipment past prime trade-in time. Don't keep cattle as harvesting units when it begins to reduce their ultimate beef value.

A few producers started calving later in the season, partly to have lighter yearlings for the next summer's grass, but mostly to fit overall resources better. In some areas, yearlings are double-stocked for only the first half of the season to get them into a feedyard while on a rising plane of nutrition and in time to finish well by fall.

As beef cattle genetics advance and higher value cattle skip the yearling phase, feedlots may still put the lighter end of those out on grass until they have pen space. But overall the shift means more grass resources for cows to produce those fast-growing, high quality calves. In some areas, former yearling pastures are stockpiled for calf weaning, heifer development and winter cow grazing.

Using those options in combination with rotating meadows and annual forage fields help optimize flexibility to fill gaps in the grazing year. Your attention to beef quality in combination with that flexibility can fill gaps where the market pays more for quality.

Next time we'll take a closer look at how beef product sales to consumers affect your profitability. Questions or comments? Call toll-free 877-241-0717.

####

END