

## Getting Started

Successfully implementing a controlled grazing program requires heaps of decision making, forward planning, and problem solving on the part of the producer. Then again, it is not exactly rocket science either.

Jim Gerrish, Grazing Specialist at the University of Missouri's Forage Systems Research Center near Linneus, MO, offers these tips on getting a controlled grazing system up and running:

### Set goals.

Controlled grazing won't necessarily be a good fit for every beef operation. Before investing money and time, develop a list of specific goals.

"There's no point in making a change in your management system, unless you have some idea of what you want to accomplish," says Gerrish. He advises making the goals as specific as possible at the outset. "Maybe you want to increase net return per cow by \$50 a year or extend your grazing season 60 days," he explains. "Or maybe you want to maintain or improve ground cover for a covey of quail. The more specifically you define the goal, the more aggressively you'll pursue that goal."

**Inventory resources.** Determining the potential production (carrying capacity of the land is key. But

you also need to assess the health of existing pastures, the condition and location of existing fencing and working facilities and the seasonal availability and distribution of water.

"Sometimes people have very good grass, but they can't make use of it (within a controlled system) because there isn't any water close by," explains Gerrish. On the human resources side of the equation, you'll need to evaluate whether you have the capital, labor and/or management to make necessary changes when implementing a new grazing system.

**Keep things simple.** An easy way to begin controlled grazing is to subdivide existing pastures with one or two fences ( or to simply close gates

between pastures). Managing these simple divisions provides a chance to try out a more controlled system and offers the opportunity to begin learning this type of grazing management at a basic level.

As you start to get a feel for what's happening on the land and with the cattle herd, you can fine-tune the system.

"A lot of farmers tell me they figure it takes somewhere around three to five years to grow into a management intensive grazing program," says Gerrish. "On my own farm, I started experimenting with controlled grazing 16 years ago and I'm still adding fences and water."

**Pick the right kickoff.** "In our part of the country (Midwest) late fall or early winter is the best time of year to launch a controlled grazing program. "You can work with stockpiled grasses and dry cows," explains Gerrish. "Number one, that helps reduce winter feed costs. Number two, if you're working with dormant grasses and non-producing animals, any mistakes you make aren't going to hurt you very much."

"Spring is the worst time of year to get started," says Gerrish. "The grass is growing fast and the cow is at the height of her nutritional needs. People tend to get frustrated and give up."

**Go for a walk.** Informal and formal networks of producers involved in controlled grazing are springing up all over the country. Many of these schedule pasture walks at individual farms.

"Going on some of these walks in your own area is a great way to broaden your knowledge base," says Gerrish. "Every farm or ranch is different so you get to see a wide variety of practices, equipment and management styles.

"People hosting these walks are usually more than willing to tell you about things that have and haven't worked for them. So it is a chance to learn from other people's mistakes," Gerrish says. .