

## **EXPERIENCE WITH YEAR- ROUND GRAZING**

### **Cliff Schuette, Breese, Illinois**

I am in partnership with my cousins who own six grocery stores and own 967 acres of land in Clinton County, Illinois. The operation consists of 220 acres of permanent pasture, 338 acres of row crop ground, 228 acres of land that is cash rented out, with the balance being in timberland. The crop rotation is made up of corn soybeans, wheat, and clover. The cattle operation has a spring- and fall-calving herd. The steer calves are early-weaned from an age range of 45 days to 4 months, and weights ranging from 125 to 400 pounds. I retain half of the heifers for replacements and the bottom half go the same route as the steer calves. These steer and heifer calves age range from 12-16 months old when harvested. Live weights range from 1,000-1,400 pounds. After being harvested at the local slaughter plant, the carcasses are taken to six grocery stores.

Enough now as far as my background; let's get into the numbers and the practices that I use to get year round grazing to work. The numbers that I came up with come from my SPA data. I feel to make money in the beef cow business you have to use all of your resources, and all of them have a certain place in the rotation. The total feed cost in my opinion must stay below \$150 to stay profitable at the low of a cattle cycle. In my case the total feed cost has been running between \$50 and \$100 per cow per year. To arrive at these numbers you have to have numbers like these -- pasture costs \$33.43, crop residues \$1.80, harvested forages \$7.99, other raised feed \$0.72, and purchased feed \$14.49. By now you are probably asking, "How do you get these low numbers?" In my case U of I Extension (Ed Ballard and Tom Saxe) and NRCS (Roger Staff, Grazing Specialist played a major role in getting things set up.

Starting out you must have water and shade, which comes in all different sizes and shapes. To find out what you have you must sample to establish your level of forage quality. In my case I worked with NRCS to run fecal samples to learn the differences in forage quality. I think getting started in the spring is simple for most graziers. In the spring, the main thing is do not let the plant go reproductive. This means graze heavy and fast, and if this is not possible, cut or clip. After the spring flush, everything is going pretty smooth with rotational grazing. The next step is the summer slump. This can be conquered a couple of ways. I prefer a cool-season grass that has a clover in the mix coupled with a really good rotation going on. Another way may be summer annuals -- brown midrib sorghum-sudangrass, pearl millet, crabgrass, etc. The third option might be some warm-season grasses. Option four that I also use with a good rotation in the summer months is row crop ground that was in wheat that had red clover frost-seeded under it in late February or early March. The only problem with this option is that most row crop ground does not have shade. When the heat index is below 85 degrees, cows can usually tolerate this temperature, so efficient grazing can occur on the stubble clover without shade.

In early August a few things need to be done for feed in the fall and winter months. The first thing I look at is "flying on" some, oats, rye, and turnips over top of my cornfields (key to success is watch your chemical rates). The next thing is to no till some oats, and turnips in the second year clover stand. The third thing that needs to be done is to top dress some pastures with nitrogen for stockpiling of fescue. With rotational grazing going on, yet with the pasture and grazing clover stubble into the fall, feed is starting to get hard to find by now, because some acres were taken out of the rotation to be stockpiled for winter feed. By now, the cornfields have been harvested and the fences go up around them as soon as the combine leaves the field so rotational grazing can begin on oats, rye, turnips, corn loss, shucks and stalks. This is a perfect mix of high quality forage with the dry matter needed to balance the diet. A couple of key points about this is to graze fast so the oats, rye and turnips can re-grow; plus, by grazing right after combining crop residue value is high yet. The variety selection of turnips makes a big difference on tonnage because some of the new ones re-grow after they've been being eaten off.

Now moving into late fall we are grazing on cornfields that have winter annuals, clover fields and pastures. Weather dictates where you can graze at this time of year. Moving from late fall to early winter you are grazing a little clover, corn stalks, rye, turnips, rotational grazed pastures and starting to use stockpiled fescue. The winter months provide only one option -- stockpiled fescue. This should be done with strip grazing. With good rainfall in the fall you should have anywhere from 2,000 to 4,000 pounds of dry matter per acre. Winter can be very harsh and the one thing that can throw a wrench into the plan is ice. Remember back in late April and early May that extra hay that was baled from the spring flush. This can be used at this time. When the stockpiled fescue runs out hay can also be used from the spring flush. Now we are to early March when the cereal rye in the cornstalk residue is 2-4 inches tall already. By this time you have already frost seeded clover on your pastures and now we are grazing cereal rye and starting to rotationally graze the cool-season pastures.

Now just look. A whole year has passed and cow feed costs have dropped \$100 per cow. So, things are starting to look better because when you have green grass, blue skies and animals grazing that is what life is all about when you are a grazier.