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COMPLEMENTING A FORAGE PROGRAM WITH ANNUAL FORAGES

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Introduction

Economists tell us that in a mature industry you must be a low cost producer to survive. The meat industry is ending the century much more mature than it began. Sophisticated production of pork and poultry with the benefit of cheap grain is putting pressure on beef producers. The long-term trend in grain prices is downward because the cost of producing grain is being reduced by three ongoing trends. The continuing enrichment of the atmosphere by CO₂ and other greenhouse gases is crop production friendly despite what you may have heard of few years back. Secondly, bio-tech seeds are increasing yields and decreasing unit cost of production. Additionally, governments here and abroad are continuing to subsidize grain producers.

This suggests to me that we, as forage based calf producers, must increase our sophistication and efficiency in feeding the brood cow. Forages are only cheap in relationship to grain when they are directly harvested by the cow. We have come a long ways in the last few decades in reducing the amount of put up hay we feed our cows. To compete with grain based meat production in the new century and millennium we must continue to improve our nutritional management.

Just because you can put up and feed back hundreds of tons of forage, and hardly leave an air-conditioned tractor seat, doesn't mean you can afford it. You may need to sell most of your high quality hay to the dairy or horse industry down the road and look for corn stalks and other cheaper ways of feeding your cows.

I want to share with you how I use a small amount of crop acreage to enhance the economic benefits of a forage harvesting cow herd.

The Use of Annual Cereals and Cereal/legume Mixture Pastures as Protein Supplements

Who of you would take a truck load of cottonseed cake out to your cow pasture, dump it in a big pile and let your cows go at it? Yet many will turn their herds into lush green cereal pastures and feel good about it. To feed green pasturage without restriction is as much a waste of resources as feeding excessive amounts of high quality put-up hay. Cereal pasturage before the boot stage commonly has a protein content between 20 and 30 percent. Five or ten pounds on a dry matter basis will meet the protein needs of even a lactating cow.

To use wheat, rye, triticale, oats, or pea pasture as the valuable resource they really are, requires easily controlled access. You should never let a cow lay down on them. Fifteen

minutes at a regular time (afternoon is best) every day or 30 minutes every other day will suffice. Added to this, dry grass, corn stalks or other crop stubble makes a "full-meal-deal" upon which your cattle will thrive. Used this way grass tetany and nitrate poisoning are not concerns.

For this kind of usage large acreages are not necessary. One acre for every three or four cows is sufficient. The important thing is accessibility for both cow and rancher. If you have no cropland adjacent to your permanent pasture, you would only need to convert at most 10% to annual pasture to balance this system. It would be best to be next to your water source, and it would need to be well fenced off.

Triticale is the best of the cereals, being 20 to 50% more productive than wheat and tolerating poorer soils much better. Nevertheless, it responds to fertilizer well and optimal results are found with about 80 to 100 pounds of nitrogen per year and 20 to 30 pounds of phosphorus. If late August through October pasture supplement is wanted, then a spring type triticale should be planted in late July. You can bump your weaning weights up 20 to 50 pounds on spring born calves with this program. In addition, dry cows will go into winter in better condition. If you have a true spring triticale, uncontaminated with rye or winter triticale, it will winter kill out and the ground will not require a lot of farming to get to the next planting.

If March and April supplemental pasture is desired, winter triticale should be planted in the second half of August. In years with good late summer and fall precipitation there will be considerable supplemental pasturage available to cows in October and November with this program. When no longer needed in May or early June, spraying with about 30 ounces of Fallow Master about 5 to 10 days after cattle are removed will keep the ground clean and delay need for tillage or an additional spraying until July.

The Use of Annual Cereal Pasture for Rapid Gains

Annual cereal pasturage can be used to put rapid gain on cull cows, thin pairs and weaned calves. Here the cereal pasture is used effectively by being supplemented with grain. In the case of the spring type of triticale planted in late July, after calves are removed from the cows in late September or early October, open or cull cows may be rapidly fattened by being given daytime access to the triticale pasture and removed at night to decrease spoilage of the pasture. Begin by giving them 3 or 4 pounds of grain night and morning, working up to near full feed.

Or, you may want to use the excess triticale forage to facilitate the weaning process and put some extra gain on the calves. The best way to do this is to put grain bunks out about a week before weaning. Each day before you turn the pairs onto the triticale give them a pound or two of grain per head in the troughs. The calves will see their mothers coming to the troughs and will get trained to using troughs. On weaning day, remove the cows far enough away the calves can't hear them. Immediately give the calves full access to the triticale pasture. If you leave an older dry cow with them you will be amazed at how little complaining the weaned calves will make and how little they will walk the fences. As you check them morning and evening, give them a little grain. Until they are all accustomed to coming to the grain, only leave it out about 10 or 15 minutes, then remove any grain left. These will be the least stressed calves you've ever

weaned!

The winter tritcale in May or early June, supplemented with grain actually works better for open and cull cows since gains are worth more then. It's always nice to sell a cull cow for \$600.00 or more in late May or early June. It has been a few years since I have done it, but with this program and with improving cull cow prices, I expect to do it again soon.