

Demonstration of Year Round Grazing Systems Utilizing BMP's

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Key Points

To demonstrate to producers the feasibility of grazing for 300+ days per year utilizing a coordinated system of winter grazing practices.

To demonstrate to producers the potential cost savings and overall economics of a year-round grazing system.

To demonstrate to producers the ability of beef cows to maintain body condition and reproductive performance under a year-round grazing system.

To develop a handbook that captures the stories of 5 producers across the province who have implemented a year-round grazing system and provides the supporting science in the background.

The handbook is a model of systems thinking for other producers to use in developing their own year-round grazing systems.

Body

The Demonstration of Year Round Grazing Systems using Best Management Practices was carried out by the Agriculture Research and Extension Council of Alberta (ARECA) with support from the Western Forage/Beef Group. This project was made possible through the generous funding of the Green Cover program and also by the Alberta Environmentally Sustainable Agriculture (AESAs). For the Green Cover program staff support, understanding and vision we are greatly appreciative.

The five associations that actively coordinated this project and their cooperators were:

Westlock

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Consort

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Over the past decade, a significant amount of research, demonstration, and extension has been done on different beneficial management practices (BMP's) that can extend the grazing season. These practices include improved management of perennial forage stands, stockpiling perennials, crop aftermath, and annuals for fall grazing, swath-grazing, and bale-grazing. The different practices have been demonstrated individually at all times of the fall and winter, and under all degrees of weather conditions. However, very little work has been done to assist producers in putting together a grazing plan that encompasses all of the different practices mentioned into a comprehensive year-round grazing plan. While these BMP's on their own are proven, the idea of putting them together has only been discussed as an extreme concept.

At a time when costs in agriculture keep rising and prices for agriculture products stay similar to years past the future for beef producers becomes less clear. As profit margins continue to get tighter, crisis like BSE, drought or a falling cattle cycle, are being covered by losses of equity in farms and ranches. Most cow/calf operations are wondering if there is a future in the business.

As coordinators of this project we do see a way to find profit in the cow/calf business. As Gregg Simmonds said at the 1998 Western Canadian Grazing Conference, "We cannot afford to be tied to an increasingly inflationary beef cow". Changes to how the cow/calf business is carried out must occur to create a sustainable and profitable future in the beef industry. **Again and again it is found that lowest cost/unit produced cow/calf businesses are the highest profit operations.**

It has been practically, scientifically and economically proven that 300+ Day or Year Round Grazing Systems can greatly reduce cost and capture a profit in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way. It is not about never feeding a cow stored feed; it is about wisely feeding stored feeds, if necessary at critical points in time. Since in order to be profitable, stored feed makes up such a small part of the system, infrastructure for it needs to be kept very low.

The five cooperators in this project are wisely using various grazing systems in combination as they create their own unique grazing system recipe. They were chosen to demonstrate their system as they are experienced "Year Round Graziers". They have been actively applying, flexibly adjusting and fine tuning these 300+ day grazing systems

on their cow/calf operations for many years. This project was carried out to show how some producers are applying the art and science of low cost/unit production to their personal, grazing structured, and beef business. Their years planning and management is focused around ways to keep cattle grazing. They are doing this with a higher degree of flexible management, but with less labor and machinery than traditional cow/calf operations.

Stan Parsons, from the Ranching for Profit organization says, "How a business is structured largely determines the profit it makes". The cooperators in Year Round Grazing Systems are managing and controlling their cow/calf-yearling businesses, structured around the animal strengths and grazing system opportunities: The strengths of the cow to fluctuate in body condition when she has fat excess or can recover condition on pasture prior to calving, can travel to feed, doesn't need to have it packaged for her, can deliver it to herself, and can harvest her own feed. The cooperator's business (management, economics, financial), decisions and system are based around using these animal strengths as much as possible. Machinery and machine use are kept to a minimum.

Typical cow/calf businesses are managing and controlling their cow/calf-yearling business, structured around the cow business weaknesses and winter feeding requirements: The need for better body condition when calving in winter and difficulty putting condition back on when milking and pastures conditions are not great, packaging stored feeds like silage or hay for the normal winter feeding period, transporting stored feeds to a central site, and delivering feed and bedding back to the cow. The typical beef business, (management, economics and financial) decisions and system are based on ever increasing technology and energy costs to put up, handle, and feed out stored feeds.

Conclusion

Overall the five year round grazing demonstrations were a provincial success. Each and every demonstration site across the province hosted a group of producers who are trying extended grazing techniques and several who are not. The number of producers who participated throughout the province was more than first anticipated, which testifies to the fact that producer-to-producer interaction is very well received. The five participating cooperators are an excellent example of producers who are cutting their overall feeding costs through various methods of extending their grazing season. The issue of lowering production costs is a provincial concern and this project was an invaluable method for passing on information from the research community, industry, and other producers. This type of extension project assists producers in putting together a grazing plan that encompasses all of the different BMP practices available into a comprehensive year-round grazing plan.

The model the ARECA associations and the WFBG came up with that was used in carrying out and delivering the resulting information from this project may be one of the greatest successes of this project: Demonstration; producers openly sharing/presenting/discussing results with other producers; field level extension staff working as a team (coordinating, supporting, actively working with cooperators, compiling, and analyzing); background science supplying answers based on leading edge producers giving direction and actively following the process and outcomes of the resulting projects carried out by researchers; and extension staff effectively delivering a

producer friendly information package for all who are interested to access. The results of this project are still being realized across the province. Each of the cooperating associations continues to receive inquiries about how to extend the grazing season and reduce input costs. The Sustainable Grazing Mentor Program main use across 8 provinces is in applying the systems demonstrated in this project. In less than 1 year since publication there have been three reprints of this handbook. There are 9000 copies in beef managers' hands across 8 provinces, two states, and into China (providing a model of effective extension). When producers are asked what the top three input costs are for their operations, they most often respond fuel, fertilizer and feed. This project encompasses all of those issues providing economically and environmentally feasible solutions.

References

There were many references drawn upon and people who contributed to the final outcome. Refer to the Year Round Grazing –365 Days handbook introduction and final page for contributing sources.