



Taking Advantage of What's Available

Small Illinois herd seeds success with forage.

by **Barb Baylor Anderson**

Lori and Kevin Engel have found that forage is the answer to many of their needs. Not only do they provide neighbors with ways to manage their hunting acreage, they market top-quality hay to local horse owners and feed their small Angus herd a primarily forage-based diet.

“We chose to raise forages because that

was the opportunity available to us,” says Lori, who, together with Kevin, created Luck-E Angus Farm near Galesburg, Ill.

Lori grew up on an Angus farm in central Illinois, while Kevin has a dairy background. Kevin also works the equipment side of the business for Birkey’s Farm Store in Galesburg.

“We do not have a farming operation

with row crops,” Lori explains. “Since Kevin is from a dairy, he knows the hay business pretty well.”

The Engels currently grow about 55 acres of hay on ground that belongs to several neighbors. In many instances, they raise hay in exchange for maintaining the ground for hunting. The Engels plant deer plots of corn for hunters and maintain the plots around the hay schedule. All of the fields are within a five- to six-mile radius of home, with most of the fields consisting of five to six acres. The largest field is about 15 acres. Other forage comes from grass cuttings in waterways.

“It is a challenge,” Lori says. “Some landowners do not let us get a last cutting after September 1, while others do not mind. We are always looking to pick up more acreage closer to home for hay. But much of the acreage around us raises corn and soybeans. We must compete with farmers for the land. Or it is in pasture with timber that sells at premium prices to hunters.”

Planting strategy

The Engels maintain a rotation plan to avoid having too many newly planted fields at the same time. The first year, they seed fields with both oats and alfalfa blended with 10% timothy so they can get an oat hay cutting



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at the milk stage, wait for the alfalfa to fill in and then get one or two cuttings of alfalfa. Alfalfa stands are generally good for four or five years.

“Obviously, our business is dependent on Mother Nature,” Lori says. “Usually we like to cut hay when it looks like we will have two or three dry days in a row. That is not always possible, especially since Kevin works in town. Sometimes we will go in and cut a field right after it rains. It takes a little juggling to make it all happen, but we really have been fortunate so far. We have never had to buy hay. Some years we have had leftover hay to start a new season.”

At the beginning of the 2010 hay season, the Engels initially put up 1,700 bales. About 500 of those were rained on, so Lori says they will use those with their own herd. Hay is stored in a barn that is open to the west, and bales are stacked seven high. While Lori worries the open barn may present problems for poor weather to affect quality, they have not had any problems.

“Our hay business is primarily for horse customers. They prefer the small square bales, which are a little more high-maintenance than the large round bales many beef producers use, but we try and meet the needs of our customers and for our own herd at the same time,” Lori says.

Feeding at home

The Engels require about 2,400 bales per year for their Angus herd. They have about 20 head, which includes 10 cows, two yearling bulls and a herd bull, some replacement heifers and steers.

Lori says the cows are fed a primarily forage diet. They prefer the oat hay over

alfalfa. The bulls are fed 5 to 6 pounds (lb.) of a grain and protein mix per day and receive alfalfa and oat hay. The heifers get 4 to 5 lb. of the mix per day and the steers get 8 to 10 lb.

“We don’t push the grain, and we don’t worry about the cost of grain. We prefer the forage-based diet and only buy grain at spot market prices a few times a year and store it in a bin,” Lori says. “Our bull yearling weights are in the 1,100- to 1,200-pound range. They are gaining 2.8 to 3.0 pounds per day, on average, versus a full-feed gain of 3.5 to 4.0 pounds per day. We like that our bulls can survive on a forage diet so they won’t shrink up on pasture when you turn them out.”

Lori has found limited success selling yearling bulls, and has decided to keep her yearlings this year and winter them. She plans to market the bulls as 2-year-olds to ready customers.

The best quality hay is reserved for the calves, including replacement heifers. Engel steers are fed a little differently for the showring to maximize carcass performance. Steers fed for freezer beef, another small side business, finish out in about 17 months at 1,200-1,250 lb.

Herd goals

“Genetics today are so solid compared with when I was younger. Cows are bred to perform well. That makes it much easier to maintain the cows on a mainly forage diet,” Lori says. “We are working to build a genetically strong cow-calf operation with balanced expected progeny differences (EPDs). We want to improve our growth and carcass traits, but we aren’t reaching for the extremes.”



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The Engels have used AI, but have missed cycles and ended up with an extended calving season. To get their season back in synch, they purchased a young herd sire from Hobbs Angus. Lori hopes the bull allows them to maintain moderate EPDs.

“He should help our carcass numbers. He is a very balanced bull,” she says. “Our oldest child is just getting involved with 4-H, so we also want a little eye appeal. Dalton, Katelyn and Kyle will all be old enough soon to get more involved in the cattle operation.”

Looking forward, Lori hopes to add to the herd and buy more pasture ground.

“I would like to increase our numbers up to 20 to 25 cow-calf pairs,” she says. “We take pride in our hay business and preserve nice-looking fields that have helped us pick up additional acreage. It is our goal to continue to do that, and perhaps Kevin will someday be able to work full-time on the farm.”



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