

The Grazier



From the state livestock convention

Musings, observations, questions, and comments

By Willy Kilmer
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After so many years of gloom, it was refreshing to see the exuberance and optimism permeate the convention. A record crowd registered. The food service people and staff of the association had their hands full but did a commendable job handling the large crowd, Weighty issues were addressed, discussed, and decided. It was a good show.

If it takes all of the equipment, feed, drugs, chemicals, consultants, computers, paraphernalia, prognosticators, transporters, lenders, experts, government officials, and reporters represented there in order to raise cattle, then there certainly will never be any profit in the business. At such a meeting it's easy however to see where our priorities lie. Therein may rest some of the answers to our problems.

A case in point. An extremely impressive front-end loader was on display. Inquiry found the ante to get aboard this monstrosity to be a mere \$120,000. The eager salesman was quick to point out however that the paltry sum did not entitle the purchaser to the comforts of a cab or such luxuries as a bucket. These were extra.

Very efficient, and expensive mixer trucks were displayed. These cost only a little more than half the price of the loader. Tires I'm sure could be purchased at reasonable prices. Now we have spent nearly a quarter million dollars and haven't bought one head of cattle, haven't produced one grain of feed, haven't bought any land to operate on. And we wonder why there's no profit in the cattle business?

Relative to all of this is the degree of pride we have in this state in the fact that we have over a million head of cattle "on feed." "On-feed" means locked in mud lots. Every mouthful of feed planted, harvested, transported, stored, transported, mixed, processed, transported, and fed. Makes one tired just to type it let alone do it. One can drive any direction in this fine state and see literally millions of tons of excellent cattle feed going to waste.

Pastures empty or poorly utilized. Milo, corn and soybean aftermath unused. Hay rotting in fence rows. All of these capable of producing lean red meat at minimum cost through the marvel of the ruminant. If we are intent on growing and feeding grain, I would strongly advise getting out of cattle and into chickens. If and when grain is priced at its true cost of production rather than its welfare supported cost, perhaps the chicken will not fare so well.

So much for the problem. The solution I feel is fairly simple. Grow and graze grass and legumes as previously suggested in this column. Instead of plowing, planting,

harvesting, transporting, storing, etc., one needs only open one gate and close another as cattle are rotationally grazed through the paddocks. Instead of mud lots, they are on clean ground. Instead of expensive inputs such as fuel, chemicals, seed, and equipment nature provides nearly all of the requirements. Instead of raping and mining our soil as we have done, we rebuild it. Instead of cattle penned up in the shade and us out in the sun working, we set in the shade and let the cattle work in the sun.

One serious problem does arise however as we attempt to practice the grazing methods suggested. Our financial (I want to say institutions but institutions don't make decisions, people do) people do not understand this concept and don't seem to be of a mind to learn about it. It varies from difficult to impossible to finance.

Perhaps funds will become available from investor types for grazing more cattle if the new tax laws remove the tax incentive for feeding cattle and return it to a profit incentive. The philosophy of selling when payments are due will have to be replaced with a philosophy of maximizing the availability of forage, utilizing it efficiently by grazing cattle, and making the payments accordingly.

I can't imagine General Motors snatching a half-finished car from the assembly line and selling it for whatever it will bring just because they have a note due.

Yet, we think nothing of selling calves, cows, or whatever just to appease the banker and let unused feed go to waste. We pay the note then turn around and rebuy, incurring additional costs and diminishing our hopes of making a profit.

Anyway, the convention was enjoyable and even though there was nothing on the official program addressing these ideas, discussions with individuals found a much more receptive attitude than in previous years. Perhaps there is hope for a HAPPY NEW YEAR.

Posts are primary to a lasting impression

By Chuck Huseman
Cedar Lake, In.

A building is only as good as its foundation, of course, and the fence builder's foundation is the posts he chooses. Here I'd like to concentrate on the most commonly used post for long term fences: the wood post. We'll discuss other materials for posts in future articles.

A wood post can be anything from a gnarled oak

branch to a planed 6x6. They usually are whatever the fence owner has ready access to or can find for the least money. We've, many times, given a customer a bid on a fence only to have them call back and ask if we could use their own posts. It generally happens they've found a "great deal" on some "cedar" posts for \$1.99 apiece and they can't see why they should pay \$4 to \$5 for posts.

Even though this type of fencing means great job security for fence builders, (the fence will need to be replaced in four or five years) we really hate to do that kind of job. Not only will the customer waste his \$1.99 on each post that he buys, but the rest of the materials used on the fence will also be wasted.

So, what is a good wooden fence post? A wooden post, in order to make a good fence foundation, must have certain characteristics: it must be sturdy, relatively easy to work with, and it must last.

A post must be sturdy in order to stand up to livestock pressure on the fence. Generally, the slower growing the tree the post was cut from, the sturdier the post. Density is a good measure of strength in posts, and one can determine the density of a post simply by picking it up. A good post with narrowly spaced growth rings will be a much heavier post than one from a fast growing species of tree.

I mention that a post should be easy to work with not only to save labor, but because a post that's so hard it's impossible to drive a staple into will not hold staples over the years. A good example of this is a "hedge" post. The Osage Orange tree produces a very dense wood that is very sturdy and will last, it seems, forever. However, these hedge posts will need periodic re-stapling over the years, and straight hedge posts are hard to find in large quantities.

The post must last. This characteristic is probably

the most important. A permanent fence should be built to last from 30 to 40 years. If the fence is going to last that long the posts have got to have that much life or more. In order to be sure that the posts that are about to be purchased will be in service that long one should always choose a **pressure treated** post.

There are three major types of preservatives used to treat and preserve wood posts: penta-chloro-phenol, creosote, and calcium chromate arsenate or CCA. These preserve wood by making the wood inedible for insects and micro-organisms that may attack it. Of the three, only CCA fixes itself into the cellular structure of the wood. Therefore, CCA will not leach out or run down a post over the years. Also, CCA has the added advantage of being dry to the touch and the only treatment that allows the wood to be painted, a significant consideration on ornamental or decorative fences.

One more thing to keep in mind. Some species of wood accept treatment better than others. Some are too hard for the treatment to penetrate. Most hardwood species fall into this category. The post of choice must be in a mid-range of hardness and density, fairly dense and hard to provide sturdiness, yet not too hard to allow the treatment to penetrate under pressure. Some good varieties are: Longleaf Pine, Shortleaf Pine, Loblolly Pine, and Virginia Pine. These pines, as a group, are often referred to as Southern Yellow Pine.

One should choose pressure treated posts that are sturdy and will accept staples readily. By doing this, and using other quality fencing materials, your fence will be a long term investment that will actually be cheaper over the life of the fence.

Another good reason for following these suggestions is the next time the fence has to be replaced, it will be your children's problem, and not yours.

Home-grown protein gets high marks

Cattle producers should put their money on "home-grown protein," Ken Coffey told scientists attending the Midwest Section, American Society of Animal Science.

The University of Missouri-Columbia researcher was talking up alfalfa.

He just finished experiments comparing protein supplements fed to Angus cattle during the last three months of pregnancy. The cows' main diet was poor quality orchardgrass hay. One-fourth of the cows received a two-pound supplement of corn and soybean meal; one-fourth received a supplement that contained 23/4 pounds of molasses plus two ounces of urea; and one-fourth of the cows received only orchardgrass hay. The rest were given three pounds of alfalfa as their protein supplement.

"All three supplemental groups maintained a positive protein balance when given these supplements," Coffey said.

"That means they were retaining more protein—more energy—than they were using and had more protein available for growth of the fetus."

Without these supplements, Coffey said, cows had a negative protein balance.

"It's important to remember that the fetus is putting on tremendous growth during those last three months," said John Paterson who worked with Coffey on the study.

"Unless cows get enough nutrition during a late pregnancy, producers will pay for it 60 days later when they try to get the cow to rebreed. She simply needs to be kept in good condition."

Both Coffey and Paterson like alfalfa as a protein source because it's "home-grown protein."

"Besides, alfalfa can reduce erosion on hilly land and it doesn't go dormant in July and August like tall fescue does," Patterson said.

Coffey said the alfalfa was "just as

good as soybean oil meal" in all aspects of his study.

"We used just average quality alfalfa—about 18 percent protein," he said.

Coffey took his study further by comparing alfalfa with soybean oil meal supplementation in sheep diets. Ewes were given enough of each supplement to meet the National Research Council requirements for protein.

Again, alfalfa came out the winner. "Alfalfa gave us bigger lambs at birth and higher milk production from the ewes during the first 28 days," Coffey said.

"The lambs from the alfalfa supplemented ewes were heavier at the beginning, and they stayed heavier."

Coffey is now running further tests to see if the better performance is the result of more amino acids being absorbed from the intestine of the alfalfa-supplemented ewes.

Peniling costs is grazing key

Cattlemen need to know their production costs and the value of added weight gain to analyze whether or not a summer grazing program will be profitable.

That's according to Dr. John Wagner, Extension beef nutritionist at South Dakota State University.

A 600-pound weaned calf selling for 72 cents a pound would be worth \$432. At 880 pounds after the grazing season the steer might sell for 65 cents a pound and be worth \$572.

The added 280 pounds would be worth \$140, or 50 cents a pound.

"Therefore, your cost of gain must be less than 50 cents a pound to make it profitable," Wagner said. "Where a lot of people make a mistake is assuming the value of added weight is equal to the selling price."

Cattlemen need to go through this penciling exercise when trying to decide whether to buy calves or yearlings to put on a grazing program or to retain ownership of their own calves or yearlings to put on a summer grazing program, Wagner said.

To make a profit today, producers must follow cost-effective management practices, and the first step, according to Wagner, is to know costs.

Production costs would include supplementation costs, marketing costs, death loss, labor, fuel, interest and—often overlooked—the cost of the pasture. "A lot of people assume grass cost is free, but you have to consider fertilizer, taxes, rent, interest and the cost of maintaining that grass," Wagner said.

He also suggests developing a marketing plan so that the type of cattle brought in fit the type of grass or program you're aiming for. The type of cattle bought will influence a decision on whether or not to supplement.

A producer needs to decide if forward contracting of some type would fit the operation, whether that be through futures or forward contracting for delivery to a feed yard. And, Wagner recommends a good health program to reduce death loss and minimize parasite problems that could reduce performance. "Cattle on pasture should be implanted. A \$1 to \$2 investment for an implant will return \$15 on the average."

He suggests supplementing only when it is cost-effective. "You need to know the type of supplement to provide. If you've got abundant grass

that's perhaps lower in quality, you may want to include a high-protein supplement," Wagner said.

But if grass supplies are somewhat restricted "you may wish to add an energy supplement to your program."

A producer needs to consider the timing of supplemental feeding—whether to supply supplement for the entire grazing season, or early, in the middle, or late in the season.

"As forage quality declines, toward the end of the grazing season as grass matures, you may want to consider feeding a protein supplement to improve forage utilization and forage intake at that time."

He urged producers to take into consideration in their decision the extra time, labor, and equipment that would be required for a supplementation program.

"Finally, if a supplementation program does pencil out to be profitable, you should add one of the ionophores—Bovatec or Rumensin—to the supplement. They have been shown to considerably increase the average daily gain of pasture cattle by 10 to 12 percent over cattle offered supplement alone."

Alfalfa invading warmer climes

To cows and farmers, alfalfa is the queen of forages.

The nutritious legume is widely recognized for its yield potential, energy value and digestibility.

But farmers from Missouri southward never gave it much of a chance, because the "queen" didn't have much of a reign. Alfalfa stands just didn't last, especially on soils that were not deep and well drained.

But all that has changed. New, better adapted varieties and improved management schemes can keep alfalfa stands going strong for six to eight years.

A team of researchers and extension specialists at the University of Missouri-Columbia has spent nearly 20 years studying alfalfa and has identified the keys to a persistent stand.

First, there are new varieties especially adapted to the mid-South of the country. They carry resistance to at least three of the diseases that had plagued alfalfa growers in the past: phytophthora, anthracnose, and sclerotinia.

Another key to persistence is cutting four times a year instead of five, a management technique that allows

high quality, yet adds at least two years to the longevity of the stand.

"Timing of the fall cutting is especially critical on poorly-drained soils where winter soil heaving is a factor," said C.J. (Jerry) Nelson, UMC forage researcher.

"Farmers should take that last cutting before September 15 to allow growth to accumulate and alfalfa to regain its strength for the winter. The growth forms a mulch to help catch snow and decreases the devastating freezing-thawing cycles in late winter that cause heaving."

A third key to alfalfa longevity is fertility. Extension agronomist Daryl Buchholz said five-ton alfalfa should get a shot of 200 pounds of potash a year. Also, he said, growers should soil test and make sure the alfalfa is getting enough phosphorus as well.

Then there's insect control. A few years ago, farmers were nervous about the alfalfa weevil, which had been known to devastate the first cutting. Now, natural controls are keeping the weevil in check. If those don't work, said UMC entomologist Wayne Bailey, there are some pesticide management programs that will.

"We recommend seeding at a rate that will give you 25 plants per square foot, knowing that the number will be reduced to 12-15 in the second year and about eight-10 in the third year," Nelson said.

"The main thing is to keep the rate of plant decline to a minimum by following a good harvesting schedule and using careful insect control programs."

As part of his study, Nelson found that alfalfa plant mortality occurs all year long, but about 60 percent of the plants that die do so between October 1 and April 1.

"As time goes by, you're just going to have fewer plants per square foot, so the remainder have to spread to fill in the gaps," Nelson said. "This is where fertility and insect control are a big help."

"The yield potential begins to drop off when there are fewer than three plants per square foot."

In a paper presented for the American Society of Agronomy, Nelson, Buchholz, and USDA-Agricultural Research Service agronomists D.L. Rausch and J.H. Coutts listed the advantages of the "new alfalfa," and pointed to the need for more research.