The Grazier

What's so tough about rotational grazing?

By Willy Kilmer
Merriam, KS.

After far too many years, there's finally starting to accumulate a nucleus of users, information, beliefs, data, articles, and discussions about rotational grazing. As one sits through the myriad cattle meetings and listens to the experts expound their pet theories as to how to make a profit in the cattle business, one would be led to conclude there's a taboo about discussing this topic in polite beef circles.

The agenda for the majority of the meetings held is highly predictable, and in my opinion, generally of little value in aiding the average cattlemen in making a profit.

We have adequately addressed the advantages, pitfalls, necessity, intricacies of options, futures, forward selling, hedging, puts, calls, shorts, longs, bulls, and bears. Mark Twain, I believe it was, said stocks are something you buy and when they go up you sell them, and if they don't go up, you don't buy them in the first place.

I have heard essentially this same advice offered in meetings and if the speaker was jesting, the audience missed the humor. After outlining the folly of putting cattle on feed without first locking in a breakeven price, they are then advised that if that's not possible, go ahead and put them on feed and lock in the breakeven when it occurs.

The idea of "putting cattle on feed" has fascinated me for many years anyhow. The term implies before going "on feed," they must be "off feed." There are two conclusions that may be drawn from this: one is that they are not being fed at all. I personally tried this once and as soon as I had the animal trained to not eat, it up and died.

The other conclusion is that the animals are not feeling well in which case that should be dealt with accordingly.

We have evolved a caste system in the cattle business that makes very little economic sense. We are either cow-calf, stocker, or backgrounder, or cattle feeder. Sure, there is some overlap and there's some justification for specialization due to feed supplies, labor, facilities, or whatever. Most of the segmentation, though, is due to tradition. Hard to justify in tough times.

We in the beef industry have bemoaned the fact chicken is about to overtake beef as the number one meat. Difficult to imagine that it has done this without employing some of the techniques we use so freely in the cattle business.

For instance, I have never heard of Tyson starting broilers for two weeks, loading them up, transporting them to the local broiler auction, unloading them and selling them to the highest bidder.

This highest bidder would then be a broiler "grower" who would reload them, take them home, unload them, get them over the sickness and stress, hope the market goes up, keep them for two weeks, reload them, transport them to the broiler auction, unload them, sell them to the highest bidder who would now be a broiler "finisher." He repeats the above.

The economic infusion this would give to the broiler-producing areas is almost beyond calculation. The trucking industry would nearly triple. Auction barns would spring up and reap the commissions which would employ many. The drug business which is already no small part of the industry would explode. Many consultants would prosper by studying the market and advising their clients at what precise moment to buy; how much they could pay at each stage; futures contracts could be reinstated and we could see the folly of ever dropping them in the first place. Funny they hadn't thought of all of these benefits.

I saw a report several years ago that tried to calculate the cost of the massive immigration of cattle around the country. It arrived at a figure of $ 195 per head in transportation, commission, medication, shrink, and death loss if the calf moved three times from birth to slaughter. I submit we don't have room for this added expense in today's beef business.

Now to rotational grazing. In most of the country we have or can produce the essential ingredients to maintain a cow, grow her calf, and put the required degree of finish on the carcass. Again in most of the country we virtually all of this can and should be done by animals grazing. A sound rotational grazing system allows this to be done. It would be folly to try to outline one that would fit all parts of the country, but there are success stories from Florida to California and from Vermont to Washington.

The most important step in starting on such a step is mental. We need to reconfirm in our minds that cattle are ruminatns. Were a commercial company today to come out with anything near as profound as the rumen we would witness the most aggressive, massive advertising campaign ever. We have this miracle available, and

yet we employ every imaginable opportunity to treat the ruminant as a single stomached animal. Foolish. The next mental aerobic that we need to perform is an appreciation of the legume. Again if a commercial company had developed anything so profound as to take free nitrogen from the air and use it to make the most nutritious feed known and then even leave surplus to aid other plants, the advertising campaign would overwhelm the one on the rumen.

Now that these two concepts are firmly embedded in our mind, we make plans to use the both of them to the nth degree. All production plans are laid with the ruminant and the legume first in mind. Only after their potential is fully recognized and used will any thought be given to row crops or to harvesting, storing, transporting, processing any feed.

One word of caution. Establishing a monoculture legume stand can be expensive and risky. In most cases a good stand can be obtained by intensely grazing the existing grass and overseeding an appropriate mix of legumes. In the many cases where row crop land is returned to the grazing regime it's best suited for anyway, a grass-legume mixture should most often be considered.

I want to say that pounds of beef to the acre should become our goal, but even that needs tempering. Profitable pounds of beef per acre, I believe, suits best, and we'll have to leave the bragging rights on the heaviest weaning weights or the highest daily gain to others.

Farrow-to-finish in the cattle business. Now that has a nice ring to it and eliminates the caste system. We don't have to apologize we don't own any cows, or that we don't background any cattle, or that we don't "feed" cattle. We can do it all. Might even make a profit.

All together now. Say rotational grazing. That wasn't hard was it? You've just done something, though, that can't seem to be done by our most renowned cattle experts. Maybe they ought to practice it.

Non-wooden posts to consider

By Chuck Huseman
Cedar Lake, In.

As mentioned in our last column, if the foundation fails, the whole building fails. The same is true with fences, the "foundation" is of extreme importance. Naturally the "foundation" of a fence is the posts that the fence is built on. The selection of these posts is a decision that warrants considerable thought. We discussed wood posts last month. What other materials are being used today?

Steel fence posts, or "T" posts are very popular and used quite extensively in all parts of the country. Their biggest advantage is they're easy to put in the ground. In most areas they can simply be driven in with a hand post driver. They are also fairly inexpensive.

They do have some big disadvantages. A steel post will rust at ground level, in moist climates, in a relatively short time. They are highly conductive, therefore, an insulator must be used in electrified fences. They are easily bent out of shape and very difficult to straighten. Also,

Continued on Page 110

GRAZIER . . . Continued from Page 108

since they are prone to rust, any wire type fence will show rust where it contacts the post before any other spot on the wire.

Over the last few years, “plastic” (fiberglass) posts have become more and more popular. Fiberglass posts come in two major types, the "T" post and the round “Fiber rod” post. Both work very well on electrified fences because of their self-insulating qualities. No insulators are needed so there is never the problem of a dead fence because of a faulty insulator-probably the hardest shorting problem to find on an electric fence.

At first thought the fiber posts would seem to be the answer as far as long life is concerned. After all fiberglass never rots or rusts.

Sadly, it’s not that simple. While it’s true that fiber posts will not rust or rot, they do deteriorate over time from the U.V. rays of the sun. These posts are manufactured using a plastic resin to bind the glass fibers together. As this resin is broken down by ultraviolet rays, the posts become weaker and glass fibers start to show on the outside of the posts. These fuzzy-looking fibers can be very painful should a splinter lodge in an unprotected hand.

As the sun’s rays break down more and more of the resin, the posts become more prone to splintering. For this reason the round fiber posts are superior to the **"T"** type. The "T" type post has more surface area in relation to its overall mass than do the round posts, so the U.V. rays can attack it faster and do more damage.

When choosing a fiber post, one should insist on prime grade, U.V. stabilized fiberglass. There are many fiber posts on the market that are seconds and rejects from the oil industry. These posts are not U.V. stabilized, and even though they will still give many years of service, they will reveal those painful splinters before a prime grade post. Even the prime grade posts differ in the quality of their resin. The higher quality the resin, the longer life to expect. On a 5/8-inch round fiber post, prime grade,, U.V. stabilized, life could be 25-30 years.

Even though these fiber posts seem to be just the ticket for electric fencing, they are too flexible to really do the job on a nonelectrified fence that is going to be under extreme livestock pressure. In that situation one must choose the most used type of post in the livestock fencing business, a wood post.

“The Old Cow”

by Leo Hopper
Chillicothe, Missouri

1. A self-propelled forage harvester with a six-inch cut.
2. Can negotiate most terrain.
3. Handle a great variety of vegetation-vegetation that I don’t have to prepare for and plant every year.
4. Low maintenance and upkeep.
5. No need for costly parts and repairs.
6. Spreads fertilizer.
7. Comes in different sizes and colors.
8. Another model that requires better care produces liquid products.
9. Will replace themselves.
10. Has high salvage value.
11. Works seven days a week.