High-tech Solutions for a High-priority Chore

Fencing options can make your life easier.

by Becky Mills, field editor

If you make a list of your favorite cattle chores, building and/or repairing fence probably isn't on it. When it comes to priorities, though, especially considering what can happen with less-than-functional fence, it is likely to be near the top.

The good news is the folks at the University of Georgia (UGA) Tifton campus, specifically at the Black Shank Farm, have a demonstration/research trial just for you. As part of the Better Grazing Project in South Georgia, Extension Beef Specialist Jennifer Tucker and Field Technician Shauni Nichols have set up an almost 40-acre pasture composed of 5-acre paddocks.

The permanent perimeter fence, six paddocks and paddock divisions all use newer, producer-friendly fencing technology.

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Permanent solution

For starters, even the perimeter fencing is electric, Tucker points out. "That is technology producers should be using if at all possible."

One of the three new fence posts used in the perimeter fence is composite PVC with predrilled holes. Self-insulating, all you have to do is thread wires through it.

Another advantage, though, and one it shares with the other two types of posts at Black Shank, is it bends rather than breaks. Although no one at the farm is confessing, the posts have been run over by vehicles and sprung back to life.

"It does depend on the angle, though," Nichols says. "If you hit them directly with a tire, they won't straighten back up."

And how's this for environmentally friendly? They're made from used window frames.

The manufacturer, Timeless, also makes step-in posts, T-posts, droppers, H-posts, corner kits and end braces, which come with a 20-year guarantee.

When it comes to H- and A-frames, Nichols says, "there are advantages to both." For the H-posts, she dug holes with a tractor-driven auger then set them in concrete.

University of Georgia specialists Shauni Nichols (left) and Jennifer Tucker (right) want producers to be able to see new fence technology for themselves.

"They are already put together, and the holes are easy to dig," she says. "You don't have to do as much measuring."

Tucker adds, "The A-frames seem to work well when you need easy corner braces, and the H-posts work better still for in-line bracing."

Nichols notes, "The holes for the A-frames are supposed to be at an angle, so we had to do those by hand."

The second post getting a test run is made by Gallagher.

"These are flexible, too, but they really stay in the ground," Nichols says.

"The good news with these posts is the clip pops off if a deer runs into the fence," Tucker says. "The negative is the clip pops off if a deer runs into the fence."

Another plus for the composite fiberglass posts is there are multiple fixed places for the glass-filled nylon clips to snap on. They also have a coating to make them more resistant to UV damage. This product has a 10-year guarantee.

The third post getting a workout at Black Shank is the SunGuard™ II fiberglass fence post.

Self-insulating like the other two posts in the trial, these have plastic snap-on caps or stainless-steel wire clips. These posts are also coated to increase their UV resistance, and the fibers aren't supposed to splinter as badly as some fiberglass products.

However, Tucker says, "Wear gloves when you're handling them."

Along with the fence posts, Tucker and Nichols are experimenting with a couple labor-saving extras. The Gripple eliminates the aggravation of having to twist wires to join and tighten them. Just thread the wires into the Gripple and use a tensioning tool to tighten it.

There are also cables designed and cut specifically for corner posts to save you from measuring and cutting.

"These are good for temporary fence, too," Nichols says, "because you don't have to staple them."

When it comes to the costs of the high-tech fencing material, Tucker says, "Technology comes with a cost, but when you compare it, it may be the same price or cheaper than the old technology." For example, on the posts with the predrilled holes, you save money on insulators.

There is also the labor savings.

"Four women put up 19 fence posts in an hour and a half," Tucker says. They used a handheld drill to make the holes, then used a post-driver or mallet to sink the posts in the ground.

"We do have sandy soils, but we did it in no time," she says. "So far we are very impressed."

Temp fences add flexibility

As part of the Better Grazing Project, which includes grazing alfalfa drilled into Bermuda grass sod, Tucker and Nichols split the 5-acre paddocks in half. Since part of the paddocks are harvested for baleage as well as being grazed, and others are used for rotational grazing,

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Pedigree and performance, Angus style

Jennifer Johnson Tucker definitely has the pedigree and performance history for her job as University of Georgia Extension beef specialist. Her dad, Ken Johnson of Tompkinsville, Ky., was a county extension agent, worked for the Natural Resources Conservation Service and led the Society of Range Management from 2008 to 2010.

Those were just his day jobs. Nights and weekends would find him and Tucker's mom, Karen, at work on Pebblebrook Farms, their registered Angus operation.

It made for some interesting experiences. Like when Tucker was called in from a date because the cows were out in the Johnsongrass.

"My daddy always said any color of electric wire was good as long as it was white," she says.

This wasn't. Neither the cows nor Tucker's date saw the wire.

"It was a shocking experience," she jokes.

Or when her mom, a floral designer, needed holders for mason jars for Jennifer's 2015 wedding to Dale Tucker. Step-in pigtail posts, in white of course, did the job.

Tucker, now 37, is grateful for the experience she and her brother, Bob, had from their immersion in National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) activities. Both received the Gold Award from the NJAA, as well as Angus Foundation scholarships.

"I just fell into it following Bob, who is 10 years older," Tucker says. "It wasn't until 1995, when Kentucky hosted the NJAA show and I won the poster, photography and public speaking contests, that I realized there was a lot more to it than just playing with cows."

Their NJAA experience helped direct their future paths. Bob used his scholarship to attend Western Kentucky University and now manages an Angus operation in Kentucky. Once again, Tucker followed her brother by using her scholarship money at Western Kentucky, where she earned her undergraduate and master's degrees before going to the University of Kentucky for her doctorate.

It looks like the pedigree and performance history are going to hold up for Dale and Jennifer's 3-year-old daughter, Emma Reed, too.

"Every day she insists on riding through the Better Grazing Project to see the cows," Jennifer reports.

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they needed to be able to put up and take down fence easily. This is where step-in posts, tape and wire come in.

"Both the black and white heavy-duty tread-in posts have multiple locations to attach wire, but we just use one strand," Tucker says. Made by Tru-Test, she says, they are the same except for the color. "The curly pigtails and the round tops make it easy to slide wire on and off, but you have to add an insulator if you want a second wire."

The white pigtail posts are made by Tru-Test; the orange ones are made by Gallagher.

"All of our reels are geared reels," says Tucker, noting they have reels from both Gallagher and Tru-Test. "They are so much easier to roll fence in and out. We just hang them on the permanent fence. With the cut-and-graze paddocks, we used all reels because we know we're going to have to take the fence up shortly after the first grazing interval."

Get more info

For more on the fencing materials used in the Better Grazing Project, contact:

- **Gallagher Fence Products**, 2270 U.S. Hwy. 30, Oswego, IL 60543; 815-797-9636; *Gallagherfence.net*
- **SunGuard II Fiberglass Fence Posts**, Geotek Inc., 1421 Second Ave. N.W., Stewartville, MN 55976; 1-800-533-1680; *Geotekinc.com*
- **Gripple and precut cables**; *Gripple.com; www.premier1supplies.com/p/speed-brace-cable-by-gripple*
- **Timeless Fence Posts & Timeless Fence System**; 203 Wilson Hill Road, Suite 2, Greeneville, TN 37745; 1-800-788-4709; *Timelessfencesystem.com*
- **Tru-Test by Datamars**, 1-800-874-8494; *Livestock.tru-test.com*

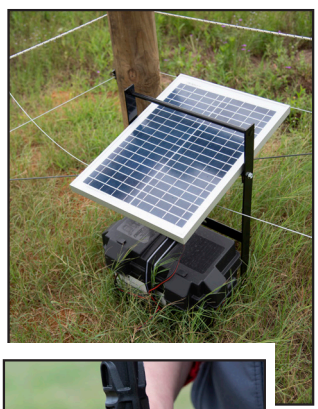
When it comes to tape or wire, each has its positives and negatives, Tucker says. "Our wire is all white. It is much more visible to the animals and producer."

However, tape tends to be more visible than even white wire, she says. "Tape tends to break quicker over time, and wire seems to stay hotter and last longer."

If either the wire or tape breaks, Tucker says, you can just tie it in a knot. Every time you do, though, it decreases the flow of electricity. They are using wire and tape from both Gallagher and Tru-Test.

If you have a rotational grazing system, Tucker says, it is personal preference whether you put all your paddock divisions up at the start or move your fence as needed.

"We move the cattle every seven days and have a strict paddock size, so we have all of our fences up. That's easier for us. With a frontal grazing or stockpiling system, when you're moving them every two or three days, it really only requires moving one fence."



Above left: A solar fence charger can eliminate the need for electricity in remote pastures.

Above right: PVC corner posts are easy to install.

Left: This fiberglass post has a pop-off clip.

The power of electricity

"There are two caveats to using an electric fence," Tucker says. "You have to have electricity, and the animals have to be trained to it."

Currently the UGA team is powering the internal fencelines with a Speedrite energizer with a remote shutoff. The external fencelines are powered by a Stafix solar energizer.

"We use both energizers to highlight the wired and nonwired options for our producers. Solar technology has improved so much in recent years, it really takes away the excuse of 'I don't have electricity.'"

As for the second caveat, farm manager Andy Dunn trained the calves by running an electrified temporary wire through a permanent paddock. When the curious animals touched it, they learned to respect it.

Put 'em to work

The next time you have to put up temporary paddocks for a sale, fence in leased ground or start a rotational grazing system, give at least part of these high-tech fencing options a try. Then, hopefully, putting up fence won't ruin your day. AJ

Editor's note: Field Editor Becky Mills is a freelance writer from Cuthbert, Ga.