

FEEDING OPTIONS 2003

Swath grazing consists of cutting a high-yielding crop, like oats or barley, after it has peaked in volume but while it is still green, and leaving it in the field in windrows. A movable electric fence contains the cows in a small portion of the field. The fence is advanced across the field as the cows clean up the windrows.

Duane McCartney, a research scientist with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Lacombe Research Station (Alberta), says swath grazing can cut winter feed costs in half compared to hauling baled hay to cows in the winter and hauling manure from feeding areas in the spring.

"We seed oats or barley in mid- to late May or early June and swath it in the soft dough stage — like you'd cut it for silage or green feed — right before killing frosts in September," he explains.

"Don't wait until the grain is mature." Swathing when the grain is too mature may cause problems with grain overload in the cattle.

"We strip-graze it through winter, moving the fence two or three times a week," McCartney explains. "The cows clean up the feed better (without waste) if you move the fence often, giving them smaller new areas rather than large ones. We've been doing this for 10 years."

Cows can graze the swaths through the winter unless snow cover is more than 24 inches (in.) deep. "If snow gets too deep, we wait and use it in the spring," he says, adding that people try to reserve some swath grazing until spring.

At the research center, the Canadians bring the cows into a facility to calve. They are returned to the swath-grazing field in late April or early May, when the field is dry. A supplement is provided to meet the cows' increased nutrient requirements due to lactation. Cows and calves use the remaining feed (give them the whole field) until permanent pasture is ready to graze. This cleans up the field so it will be ready for the next planting.

"There can be problems if you get rain in early spring," McCartney says. "Some feed will be trampled into muddy ground. If it gets too wet, you can put the cows somewhere else for a while, or make the field bigger." Another option is to fence off a small area of the field to contain the cows, supplementing them with hay, until the ground dries out to minimize trampling damage.

Mold is generally not a problem if you cut feed at the right time, he says. "We suggest people swath their crop when weather turns cold. As long as weather stays cold, the



PHOTOS BY DUANE MCCARTNEY

► **Above:** Swath grazing can cut winter feed costs in half compared to hauling baled hay to cows in the winter and hauling manure from feeding areas in the spring, says Duane McCartney, research scientist with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.



► **Left:** Cows can graze swaths through the winter unless snow cover is more than 24 inches deep.

A Northern Feeding Option

Swath grazing can cut winter feed costs.

by Heather Smith Thomas

swaths won't deteriorate; it takes warmth for mold to grow."

There is more chance for mold problems if you live in an area that gets a lot of warm weather or warm rain in the fall, he continues. The earlier you plant, the more yield you'll get; but, if you seed too early, you must cut it earlier, which could lead to warmer fall weather and greater risk of mold problems.

"If weather gets quite cold, snow gets a hard crust and cows can't get to the feed,"

McCartney warns. "Some people drive a tractor over the swath to break the crust, push it with a snow blade, or use auxiliary feed for a while.

"You must have a plan for if things go wrong," he continues. "Then you can hold that field for use in the spring."

Also necessary, he adds, is a suitable watering site. "You can winter cows on snow, but only if snow is available all the time. If

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you're in an area that sometimes doesn't have snow, cows must have access to water — even if they have to walk up a lane to get to it.”

McCartney says swath grazing won't work in areas that get freezing rains in the fall. “You'll have ice all over the feed, and a lot of mud,” he explains. “But people all over western Canada are adapting this type of feeding program. Possibilities are more limited in Ontario and in eastern Canada, because there's too much rain and mud in November-December for it to work very well,” he says.

The details

“We use barley or oats. Choose a grain

crop that grows well in your area. Peas can be added to the mix, and we've tried that, but wildlife will be more [of a] problem; deer love peas. We've had deer come in and eat all the peas,” he says. The peas, being a legume, also tend to mold more readily than grain crops.

“If you are backgrounding calves and need to increase the protein, you could add peas, but for wintering dry cows, you really don't need them,” McCartney says. If you use barley, select a variety without sharp awns to minimize problems with mouth injuries and abscesses.

The crop is cut and laid in windrows 3 feet (ft.) wide and 3 ft. high with a grain

swather that doesn't condition the feed like you would for cutting hay. You don't want it crimped or it will squash all the grain out of the heads, and the feed won't keep as well.

Using the same fields every year for swath grazing works best since you can have them fenced for cattle and have a water source available. McCartney suggests having a windbreak for protection during winter storms and says it is also beneficial to provide bedding so cows won't lie in the feed windrows. They'll waste less feed. They also will eat part of the bedding, which will extend the total amount of feed in the field.

Swath grazing may not work if you have a lot of wildlife that come into your fields to eat. If there is a lot of grain in the crop, flocks of geese may also become a problem. Weigh all the factors to see if this type of winter feed program will work for you. 