



# Historic Herd, Fresh Focus

Management-intensive grazing maximizes forage use.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**, field editor

**D**ixon Shealy grew up in Miami, 670 miles and a world apart from Black Grove Angus Farm. Although his father, Walter Shealy, was raised in Newberry, S.C., and started the herd as a 4-H project in 1962, he didn't move his family to the operation until 1992, when Dixon was a high school sophomore. Even though Dixon did show cattle one year, he says, "I wasn't a 4-H kid. I played all the sports and studied really hard."

After graduating from Florida State University with a degree in finance and managing a restaurant, he came back to Black Grove as its sole employee in 2005.

"Obviously, it was a disadvantage not to have an ag background, but I've used it as an advantage," says Shealy, now 39. "My dad and I look at things from a different plane, both from each other and from other farmers in the area."

## Trying something new

One of the first things Shealy's fresh eyes



► Black Grove Angus Farm is designated as a Historic Angus Herd.





## Making hay count

While Dixon Shealy's focus on grazing management does cut down on the amount of hay he feeds on the Newberry, S.C., Angus operation, he still has to have hay. Rather than give up grazing acres to produce hay, however, he buys it. Plus, he says buying it is sound economics.

"Hay is sold by the thousand-pound bale in our area. You can have someone bale your own forage for \$15 a bale. There is enough nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) in hay, if I was paying for the fertilizer in it, that would be another \$15. I've gotten \$30 worth of value out of it, and I haven't even fed it yet."

As a rule of thumb, most grass hay averages 40-50 pounds (lb.) of N, 10-20 lb. of P and 40-50 lb. of K.

Shealy uses those purchased nutrients, and the seed in the hay, to help pastures in need of renovation. "I try to winter one group of cows on my worst field and roll out hay over the course of the winter. Last winter we fed wheat hay and this spring, I had 45%-50% coverage of volunteer wheat. We are going to do it with ryegrass."

When he rolls out the hay, he puts up a string of electric wire so the cows only have access to a thin strip of it so they don't waste it. Then, when they eat the part they can reach, he moves the fence.

He does the same with baleage, although he says the ensiling process kills most of the seed so it doesn't work to reseed the pasture. The pasture still gets the benefits of the imported nutrients, though and, he says, "It doesn't spread nearly as many weeds."

► **Above:** Newberry, S.C., Angus breeder Dixon Shealy relies on management-intensive grazing to make the most of his forages.

► **Below:** Shealy says management-intensive grazing makes it easier for him to check his cows.

nutritious, vegetative forage, while giving the forage they just grazed time to rest, recover and regrow.

Jennifer Tucker, a University of Georgia beef nutrition specialist who focuses on forage management, says: "The benefits of MiG include an increased stocking rate and greater utilization of available forage. If managed properly, the cattle consistently get a higher-quality product. Research shows improvements in stocking rate, calf production and gain per acre."

She adds, "With continuous grazing, cows can be more selective, so you can see an individual animal do well. With MiG, we don't see the benefits so much with individual animals but in the overall herd."

Shealy decided to give it a test. Temporary electric fence is a necessity for most MiG systems, and he didn't have power on parts of the farm, but he picked a couple of pastures for a trial run.

"There were two things that became obvious. The first is you need good equipment," he notes.

For example, he found trying to use a makeshift reel for taking up electric wire was false economy because it took forever to move fence. His second observation was even more dramatic. "Wow. There is a lot of grass I'm not using."

Gradually, he converted the entire 140-head cow herd to a year-round MiG system.

### Flexibility is key

His forages are fescue; wild native ryegrass; improved Bermuda grass, either Cheyenne or Coastal; Dallis grass; and crabgrass. Rather than stocking rate, he goes by stocking density, or pounds of cattle per acre. He says

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spotted was the grazing program on the 330-acre operation.

"It was a basic rotation system with permanent subdivided pastures and a not very high stocking rate."

He says they moved the cows once a week on weekends, whether they had eaten all the forage in the pasture or whether there was enough forage in the next pasture to warrant a move.

Shealy started catching glimpses of more intensively managed rotational systems in magazines and field days. Plus, a Natural

Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) employee came to the farm preaching the advantages of mob grazing.

"I did some research and read Jim Gerrish's books. I could see mob grazing wasn't going to work on our operation, but management-intensive grazing (MiG) would offer a lot of potential benefits. We weren't maximizing our forages," Shealy says.

In MiG systems, cattle are typically stocked at higher rates than in conventional systems, and the cattle are rotated to different pastures more often. The goal is to give livestock fresh,



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flexibility is the key, whether it is stocking density, the length of the rotation, or the amount of residual forage left in a paddock.

“We could graze 50,000 pounds an acre for a week or strip-graze 75,000 and move them every day. When they are eating stockpiled forage, we move them every day. When the grass is growing, we give them bigger areas and let them be more selective,” Shealy says.

Ditto on the residual.

“It depends on whether we fertilized it or not, what kind of grass it is and what time of the year,” Shealy explains. “We’ll usually leave a minimum of 5 to 6 inches with a cool-season grass and 2 to 3 inches with Bermuda.”

He adds: “We also want to look at the whole farm and see what our forage reserve is. If we have to stop the rotation, the pasture

they’re in becomes a sacrifice pasture.” At that point, he supplements and/or feeds hay.

After 10 years of MiG, Shealy likes the results.

“There is a noticeable benefit to the mixed-grass pastures and the cool-season grasses,” he explains. “There is an increase in diversity where we’ve been more proactive managing the grazing.”

Because he is now able to stockpile more forage, he is feeding less hay (see sidebar).

He’s also seen benefits with the cattle, especially with ease of handling.

“It is easy to walk through them and check them when you’re moving them from one small paddock to another. They are more accustomed to humans. I don’t have to move them with a feed bucket, they come running when they hear the click of the polywire reel.”

Even with the advantages, the former finance major still keeps an eye on the bottom line. As a result, he tends to graze less intensively during the fall and spring breeding seasons.

“I have five different groups of cattle then. At other times, I have two groups. Moving cattle then is much more economical.”

Using numbers from a chart developed by University of Kentucky ag economist Greg Halich (see Table 1), he says, “You almost need 100 cows to justify moving them more often.”

Halich agrees. “There is a benefit from moving cattle more often but there is also an



► **Above:** Shealy uses a grazing chart to analyze how much and how often he uses different pastures.

► **Below:** The cattle on Black Grove Angus Farm are on an intensively managed grazing program.



**Table 1: Labor cost per cow per day**

45-minute paddock moves	Days between paddock moves			
	1	2	3.5	7
Number of cows				
30	\$0.45	\$0.26	\$0.18	\$0.13
50	\$0.27	\$0.16	\$0.11	\$0.08
100	\$0.13	\$0.08	\$0.05	\$0.04
200	\$0.07	\$0.04	\$0.03	\$0.02

**Note:** 30-cow herd; \$15-per-hour labor cost; 45 minutes to move cattle; one additional hour spent with cows. Table is from Greg Halich, University of Kentucky.

increased cost. The more intense, in terms of rotational grazing, the more time it takes and the costs can outweigh the benefits.”

Halich says the breakeven can vary from operation to operation.

“It could be once a day, or even twice a day, or once a week,” he says. “In general, the more cattle you have in a herd, the more you can afford to move them. It doesn’t take much more time to move 100 cows than it does 10.”

So far, though, whether it is in improved pasture quality, cattle that are checked more often, or the return on investment of his time, Shealy likes the fresh look of Black Grove’s pastures. “I get an additional 90 to 100 days of grazing through more proactive management. In a good year, that will get me through the winter.”



**Editor’s Note:** *Becky Mills is a cattlemaster and freelance writer from Cuthbert, Ga. For more information on Black Grove Angus Farm, see <http://blackgrove.com>.*



## Grazing the Internet

Much of Dixon Shealy’s pasture time is enhanced by his computer time. His go-to web site is <http://onpasture.com>, a free online publication that says it brings research and experience into practices producers can use now.

Shealy’s grazing plan chart, <http://onpasture.com/tbishopp2012-2013grazechart/>, came from Troy Bishopp by way of this site. He downloaded it and took it to an office-supply store to have it enlarged.

The first year, he just filled in the blanks that showed where his cows were spending their time. That made it easier to analyze his pastures.

“During the growing season, I found I was using some pastures two to five times as much as others,” he notes. “What clicked in my head is you can afford to spend extra money taking care of pastures you use two to five times as much. The truth is, though, you may need to spend extra money on the underperforming pastures.”

Shealy is also a fan of Troy Bishopp’s [www.thegrasswhisperer.com](http://www.thegrasswhisperer.com).

Bishopp is a New York regional grazing specialist and grass farmer.

All of Shealy’s learning and networking isn’t done online, though. The Newberry, S.C., Angus breeder says, “South Carolina started a forage and grasslands council. They have some really good programs. I encourage people to find and join their local affiliates and see what they have to offer.”

Information on state affiliates can be found on the American Forage and Grasslands Council web site: [afgc.org](http://afgc.org).

“The extension service is a fabulous resource,” he adds. “I’ve been to AI (artificial insemination) school at Clemson and pasture workshops at Clemson and the Edisto station (Edisto Research and Education Center, in Blackville, S.C.).”

## Stockpile for savings

One of the key parts of Dixon Shealy’s management-intensive grazing (MiG) plan is stockpiling 60 acres of Bermuda grass for fall and winter grazing.

“It extends the grazing system for the dry cows by a month,” says the Newberry, S.C., Angus breeder.

“We buy our hay and save 65 to 75 bales,” he reports. At \$60 a ton (two bales), that is \$1,800 to \$2,000. “For 20 minutes a day, I save \$1,800 to \$2,000. That works out to \$50 an hour and doesn’t count the time it would take for me to feed hay.”

He also says, “I think the cows perform better on it, along with a protein tub.”

Shealy starts with Cheyenne Bermuda grass, a seeded variety. Although the quality isn’t as good as Tifton 85, he says, it beats common Bermuda grass, which doesn’t hold up as well for stockpiling.

He begins preparing the warm-season perennial for stockpiling the first part of August by strip-grazing through the pasture with a stocking density of 25,000 to 50,000 pounds (lb.) of cattle per acre. “We just want to level it off so the regrowth will be more nutritious,” he explains. In mid-August, he pulls the cattle off. Some years he fertilizes; other years he doesn’t. “That is up to your pocketbook. It can be done without fertilizer.”

He doesn’t have a set time to start using the stockpiled forage, but says: “That’s a function of what the other pastures are doing. I rotate back through the fescue and common Bermuda.”

In 2015, he was grazing stockpiled Bermuda grass in December, and it was still green. In the fall of 2016, the forages on the operation were hammered by drought, and he moved cattle on the stockpiled forage in late October.

To strip-graze, he uses the same temporary electric fence posts and wire he uses in his regular rotational grazing.

“We strip-graze at a much higher density, 75,000 pounds plus,” he explains. “The grass is less palatable, and no new grass is coming up behind it, so we want them to eat anything that is edible. We want to get higher utilization. The key is stocking density.”

By no means does he short-change the cows, though. He only leaves them on a strip for 48 hours at the most before he moves them to a fresh strip.

“It works much better to move them daily,” he says.