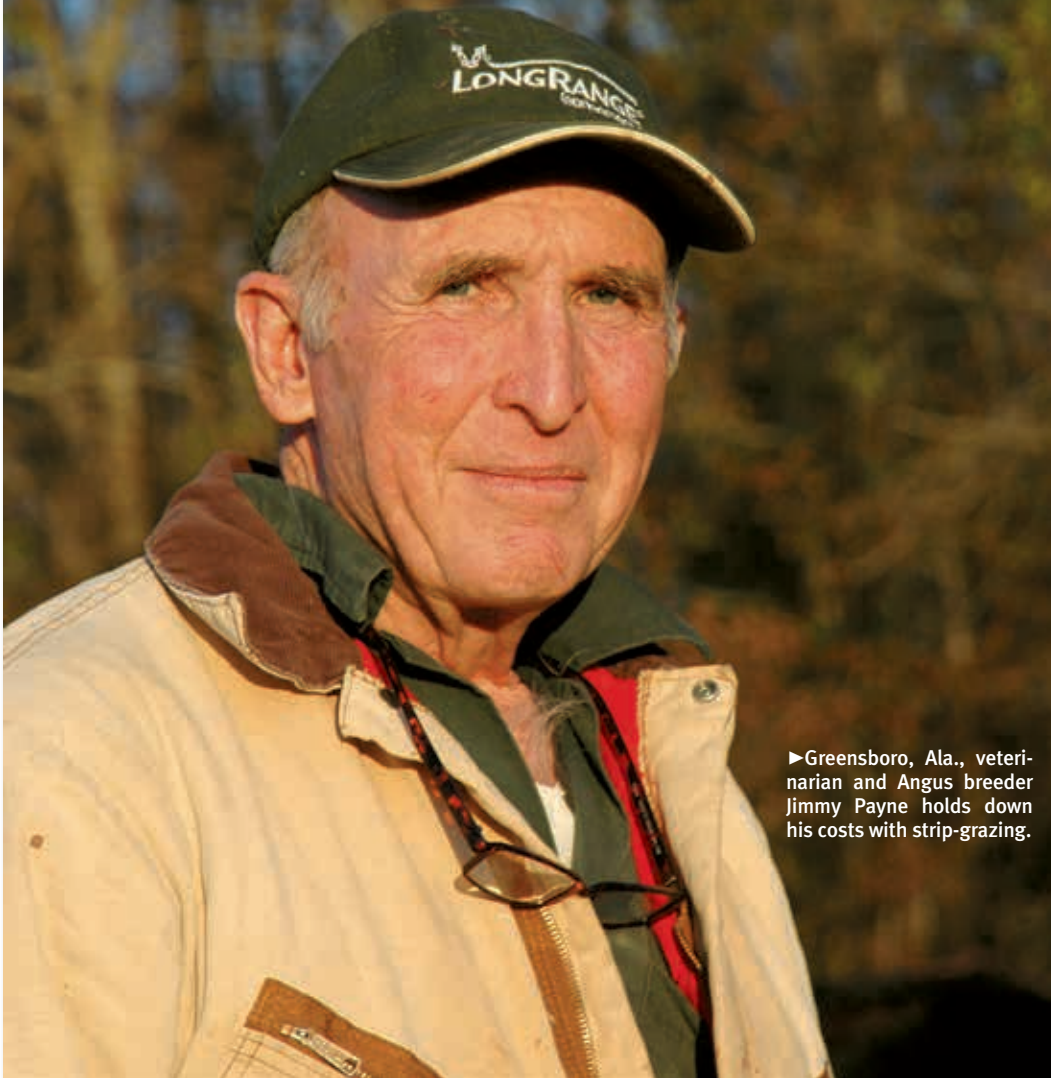


Ugly Pastures, Pretty Bottom Line

Strip-grazing and maximizing use of low-quality forages turns a profit.

Story & photos by *Becky Mills*, field editor



► Greensboro, Ala., veterinarian and Angus breeder Jimmy Payne holds down his costs with strip-grazing.

There was the one client, though ... says Payne, "He built a system complete with portable water troughs. Then he promptly moved to Wyoming."

Payne tinkered around with intensive forms of grazing on his place until he found ways to make it work for him. Most of his pastures are 10-20 acres and are made up of a small amount of fescue, Durana clover, vetch, ryegrass, wild barley, bahiagrass and common Bermuda grass.

"It makes sense to me that a monoculture is asking for trouble," he says.

The pastures are likely to have healthy populations of weeds, too, but other than a little spot spraying on the ones that have gone to seed, Payne lets the cows take care of them.

"I haven't mowed anything on this place in three or four years, some pastures more," he explains.

Payne's grazing style is probably more accurately labeled as strip, rather than rotational. He uses a single strand of poly wire and temporary fence posts to move his 80 cows to a fresh strip of grazing every day, or sometimes twice a day.

"People who are serious about it have movable water troughs or troughs in every paddock. Mine have to walk back to water," he says. Each of his pastures does have its own water source, though, so depending on how fast the grass is growing and how much new ground he gives them every day, they don't

back-graze more than a week.

He uses experience to decide how much to ration out for the day, but most times it is between a half an acre to an acre and a half.

"You've got to have enough cows to eat the grass and weeds, too," he explains. "It is a thin line. You learn. They'll eat 70% of what's there, trample 20% and leave 10%."

Prairie Eden Angus Farm doesn't exactly look like Eden. Most of the pastures could generously be described as scrubby. Jimmy Payne looks out his truck window and admits, "This is not a pretty pasture, but you have to look down deep at the bottom line."

The Greensboro, Ala., Angus breeder and veterinarian started experimenting with management-intensive rotational grazing 25 years ago. Experiment is the key word.

"I started it so I could better advise my clients on how to be more profitable," he

explains. "Keith Glover, my partner when I was in the dairy business, referred to my farm as Experiment Station Two. A lot of what I do is like an experiment station. I show my clients what they can do."

He says that part has worked. Several of his clients have started rotating their pastures, although they don't do it as intensively as he.



Take half, leave half

For new graziers, Auburn University

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extension forage specialist Jennifer Johnson simplifies the concept.

“Our rule of thumb is take half, leave half, rather than try to measure forage,” she says. “See if you can get any extra days of grazing doing that.”

Payne estimates he has 200-220 acres in the rotation for his cows and calves, including woods.

“I probably graze each square foot three times a year,” he says.

As for feeding hay, well, there are 5-year-old rolls of purchased hay in his barn. However, when he does feed it, he feeds the good stuff.

“I buy ryegrass hay,” he explains. “I found out when I was in the dairy business, it will make more milk than any other kind of Alabama hay.”

“We usually don’t feed any hay to the cows,” he notes. “Last year we fed eight rolls. The year before we fed four rolls. When it got dry in August, I broke out the hay. I don’t want my cows to be hungry, and I don’t want to damage the grass.”

USDA Agricultural Research Service

(ARS) agronomist Geoffrey Brink says it is wise not to damage forage by overgrazing.

“Leaves produce food from photosynthesis,” Brink explains. “Plants grow by using food from the leaves. They first use food from the leaves that are left after grazing. If those leaves are gone, the grass has to rely on food stores in the stem, roots and rhizomes so that process of regrowth is slower. Regrowth will be faster if the leaf area remains to capture sunlight.”

Payne’s cows don’t look hungry, either. At calving he targets a body condition score (BCS) of 7.0 and wants them in a BCS of 6.5 at breeding. He explains, “In the summertime they have four months of cheap feed — grass. They are dry and put on weight.”

While he is miserly with the hay, he does supplement with purchased feed. When his cows start calving in October, he weighs and



► Sadie, a Border Collie, is there to help if needed on Jimmy Payne’s Angus operation.

tags the calves and moves them to a pasture that connects to his barn. Then he starts supplementing them at about 10 pounds (lb.) per head per day with soy hull/corn gluten pellets when he brings them in to check for heat and breed them. He keeps that up through the breeding season. That makes for around 120 days of feed.

Besides keeping his cows in breeding shape, the purchased commodity feed serves another purpose.

“They poop it out. That’s my fertilizer,” he says. “I soil-test occasionally. We’ll buy phosphorus (P) if we need it, but I don’t buy nitrogen (N). If the minerals are okay and the soil is okay and you don’t add N, the pH will stay okay.”

Payne doesn’t skimp on minerals for the cows, but buys them by the ton to save 50¢ per bag.

“I’m not a fan of letting cows choose their own minerals,” he comments. The mix he feeds contains 25% salt, and his cows eat a quarter to a half pound per head per day.

For all his unconventional ways and less-than-picture-perfect pastures, he doesn’t short-change his cows, at least not judging by their records. He regularly gets pregnancy rates of 90% during his 65-day season, even more impressive considering he has been 100% artificial insemination (AI) since 1961. Normally his first-service rates are around 70%.

“This year it looks like it will be 75%,” he reports, “but last year it was 58%. I let my cows get too thin. I made them eat too many weeds.”

That 90% pregnancy rate includes first-calf heifers breeding back for their second calf. However, there is a caveat. They have their first calf at 3 years of age.

“I used to calve at 2, but I couldn’t get them to rebreed,” he explains. “The calves



► Jimmy Payne’s cows move easily through his strip-grazing system.



► **Above and below:** He uses a single strand of poly wire and temporary fence posts to move his 80 cows to a fresh strip of grazing every day, or sometimes twice a day.



were 150 pounds lighter because I don't creep-feed. Now I breed them at 27 months. They average 1,150 pounds as 2-year-olds, and that is on no feed or hay. We don't have any calving difficulty. They rebreed, and their calves weigh the same as the mature cows. They fit my program."

His total program adds up to a direct cost of around \$330 a year, including rent; feed; minerals; breeding costs, which include semen and AI certificates; and vet costs. Even though he does his own work, he adds in the supplies.

"I tell folks they have to do something a little different to show a profit," he states.



Editor's Note: *Becky Mills is a cattlemaster and freelance writer from Cuthbert, Ga.*

Bargain bulls

You've heard car salesmen insist they are passing the savings on to their customers. Jimmy Payne means it. Really.

For starters, the bull calves graze right along with their mamas on his bare-bones strip-grazing program. No creep feed allowed. Although they, and their sisters, can slip under the single polywire any time they take the notion to get a headstart on the next patch of decent grass.

At weaning, they average around 650 pounds (lb.). After, they stay on pasture, however not on an intensive rotation like the cow herd.

"I don't have that many 20-minute periods in the day to move the string," he explains. In its place, they get hay as needed. He also begins feeding them the same soy hull/corn gluten pellet mix he uses to supplement the cows at breeding.

"I feed the weaned bulls around 1.5% of their body weight a day, but I eyeball them. If their bowels get too loose, they are getting too much grain and not enough fiber. If they are leaving feed, I am feeding them too much. I want them to gain 2 or 3 pounds a day without founder or bloat."

Their adjusted yearling weight is usually around 1,000 lb. By the time he sells them by private treaty at 14 months, they average 1,200 lb.

While their upbringing may be bare bones, their genetics are not. Every last one is sired via artificial insemination (AI).

"We breed by the numbers," says Payne. "We want growth. I won't use a bull unless he is way above the breed average. Plus, they have to have a lot of capacity to do well on low-quality forages."

He continues, "I've been using scrotal circumference EPDs (expected progeny differences) since they came out, and most of these little Angus bulls pass their breeding soundness exam."

He adds, "We want good udders and milk. We're our own best customers for females ... We try not to linebreed or inbreed at all, and we only use proven sires."

When it comes to pricing, he looks at organized bull sales.

"I discount them by how much it would cost me to put them in sales," he says. "This year they were bringing \$4,000 to \$5,000. I get \$3,500."

As far as payment, he isn't hard-nosed.

"I had one customer that lost his job before he bought his first bulls," he said. "I sold him bulls on credit. Now he buys six to 10 a year. If it is a young farmer and he's having cash-flow problems, I'll wait 'til he sells his calves to collect."

For others, their money is no good.

"I won't sell to some people twice," he says. "They have to take care of the bulls. Then there are people who only buy one a year or every other year that go to the top of my list."

Good luck getting on that list. Says Payne, "Usually most of them are promised before the cow is bred."