

EAST CENTRAL UPDATE

Highlighting Beneficial Management Practices in East Central Saskatchewan

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Swath Grazing as a Winter Feeding Alternative

Norm and Pat Wittevrongel are taking an alternate approach to wintering their cattle.

The Wittevrongels, who operate a ranch near Neudorf, use swath grazing to winter feed their herd of about 115 cows and 40 replacement heifers out in the field. They became interested in the system after seeing the results some of their neighbours were having with it.

“I really liked what I saw,” says Norm Wittevrongel.

“We tried it the first year with oats, and that didn’t work out because it rained a bunch in the fall and it all turned black and mushy.

But since then we’ve been using millet all the time, and that works out really well.”

The Wittevrongels custom seed Crown and Siberian millet on two quarters and another 50-acre parcel near their yardsite. The millet is planted in early June, and is swathed as soon as it heads out in late August.

Because millet has a waxy leaf surface, it is very resistant to weathering and does not suffer dramatic quality reductions even if it gets wet. This means that millet can lie in the swath for long periods – through the fall and right up to the following spring – without rotting.

“Last fall I was a little concerned about it, because it was wet right until the day it froze. But it didn’t seem to bother it at all,” says Norm.

Once the cattle are ready to come out of the pasture late in the fall, the Wittevrongels use portable electric fencing to divide the swathed fields into small paddocks, each with sufficient feed to last the cattle for at least one day. The



typical consumption rate for millet ranges from 30 to 40 pounds of dry matter per adult animal per day, depending on the animal, the weather conditions, and the crop.

The Wittevrongels usually move the fencing each day, allowing the cattle into another small section of the field. They do not use

watering troughs or dugouts in the field, instead allowing the cattle to get their water from the snow.

According to Norm Wittevrongel, this system gives them a lot of flexibility. Using small pens and moving the cattle daily ensures that the animals clean up almost all of the feed material available, and ensures they have good clean snow to eat. However, when necessary they can also fence out a larger paddock with sufficient feed and snow for several days.

The Wittevrongels calve in May, and wean the calves in November. The calves are sent out on the swath with the rest of the cattle within a week after they’re weaned.

According to Norm, even in years where there is a lot of snow, the cows break up any drifts that accumulate with their browsing, allowing the calves to get at the feed.

In terms of the cattle's performance while swath grazing on millet, the Wittevrongels have been very pleased. As an example, Norm refers to a group of heifers that they purchased in mid-winter last year. These heifers were about a month older than his own, and were being watered and fed baled oats in a corral. Yet this year Norm says there is no noticeable difference between the animals that had been fed and wintered in the corral and the ones that were swath grazed.

"Those calves that were wintered tough out there [in the field], there's really no difference. It didn't set them back even a bit," says Norm, who also notes that although they put mineral out in the fields in troughs, the cattle do not use it much.

There are other benefits as well.

"The one thing that I really like about swath grazing is that I can have cows and calves together, or cows and first calf heifers or whatever, and you don't have to worry about those 'boss cows.' You turn them out on all that swath and they scatter over the whole area, and they all have the same chance to eat," says Norm.



Norm Wittevrongel discusses swath grazing with local producers.

Since the Wittevrongels move fences almost every day, the cattle are accustomed to being handled regularly. Norm notes that the system helps them to make an early choice on which calves they want to keep over as replacement heifers based on how well they do on the swath. This allows them to sell any animals they don't want to hold over early, when their price is still high.

The Wittevrongels' operation was a featured stop on a recent winter feeding workshop tour hosted by a partnership between the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority, Ducks Unlimited Canada and other agriculture groups, extension and conservation agencies. The goal of this partnership is to provide information and assistance to producers in East Central Saskatchewan who would like to implement beneficial management practices within their operation.

For more information on swath grazing or other alternative winter feeding options, please contact Jason Puckett at (306) 786-5845.

Cattle wintering sites located next to a watercourse can have a negative impact on the quality of surface water due to runoff. This runoff, which tends to be nutrient rich, can also potentially decrease groundwater quality by leaching down through the overlying soil. Swath grazing in the field is one management option that helps reduce runoff and maintain healthy riparian areas.

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