

EAST CENTRAL UPDATE

Highlighting Beneficial Management Practices in East Central Saskatchewan

March 2007 Issue

Adding Value to the Land with Bale Grazing

More and more, cattle producers are looking for alternate winter feeding methods that are both cost- and labour-efficient. But they may not know that many of these options can also be used to improve their land and help protect water sources.

“There are lots of different ways producers can winter their cattle. It’s all about finding an option that is suited to your operation, and that helps you meet your overall management goals,” says Jason Puckett, a Range Ecology Technician with the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority.



Bale grazing can be an attractive winter feeding option for producers looking for an alternative to feeding in corrals

“One practice we’ve seen producers have success with is bale grazing the cattle in the field through the winter, rather than feeding them in a corral site.”

Lon and Kathy Slade run commercial cattle on their ranch southeast of Raymore. Right from the start, they wanted to find a workable balance between the grazing pressure they were placing on the land and the productive capacity of their pastures.

However, much of this pasture had either been broken for annual cropping by previous owners or had simply been over-used, severely limiting its productivity. Rejuvenating the remaining grass and re-establishing viable pastures became a major priority. And their winter feeding methods are part of achieving that goal.

The Slade’s choose to keep their cattle in the pasture and use bale grazing. In part, they chose this option because it presented a value-added way to feed – the value in this case being the addition of much-needed nitrogen back into the soil courtesy of the manure the cattle leave behind.

“We think of our manure as a valuable asset. The cows leave it right where we need it,” says Kathy Slade.

“And it’s different than taking the manure from your corrals and spreading it, because when you do that you lose the urea, and you end up with a high concentration of it back in the corrals.”

The cattle are regularly rotated into different fields to protect the existing tree and bush stands and prevent excess nutrients being left on any one piece of land. This helps spread the benefits of the manure over a larger land base.

Not only does this option provide a relatively hands-off method of adding nitrogen to the soil, but the small amount of feed that the cattle leave behind – which is often thought of as waste – also contributes to the rejuvenation of the pasture.

...continued on next page

“It’s amazing when you put these bales out, the next spring there’s a little bit of left-over litter from the bales, but it’s not really waste because by the end of that summer, that patch will be growing an unbelievable amount of grass. And the next summer, you can see a ring where each bale was. The grass is so heavy there that it’s lodging, it’s so thick,” says Kathy.

One factor that made bale grazing a particularly good fit for the Slade’s was the general topography of their land. The majority of their pastures have an abundance of low-lying, treed-in areas. These areas provide valuable natural shelter for the cattle, eliminating the need to build portable windbreaks and move them from pasture to pasture as the cattle are rotated.

“For bale grazing, having some shelter for the cows is really important. Some people consider those stands wasted land, but those are very valuable areas for us,” says Kathy.

Typically, the Slade’s will provide each herd with enough bales to last for multiple days. It makes the system convenient for the people doing the feeding, and keeps the cattle happy at the same time.

“This way they aren’t waiting on us. It can be 40-below and they’ve got all the feed they need. We don’t necessarily need to be out there every day,” says Kathy, adding that because it is more difficult for the cattle to break open a new bale than to clean up one that is already open, they will usually eat as much of each bale as they possibly can, keeping wasted feed to a minimum.

The Slade’s have been pleased with the results they have achieved with bale grazing, both in terms of the plant vigour in their pastures and the weight gains from their animals. One trend they have noticed is that their less dominant cows - the ones that tend to get pushed to the back of the feed line – seem to do better with bale grazing. They reason that while the more dominant cows are still able to eat as much as they want, there are always other bales available so the less dominant cows have feed in front of them.

Kathy also notes that their use of bale grazing has not only proven popular with their herd. It seems the local wildlife likes it too.

“You come out some mornings and you’ll see cows all around one bale and elk all around the next,” she laughs. “And that doesn’t bother us. It’s nice to see the wildlife.”

For more information on bale grazing and other cattle wintering options, please contact Jason Puckett at (306) 786-5845.

Wintering cattle in confined 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. Bale grazing in the field is one management option that helps reduce runoff, protecting water quality and maintaining healthy riparian areas.

For more information on Environmental Farm Planning, please contact:

Yorkton North

Sheldon Cooper

Phone: (306) 675-4513

Yorkton South

James Pollock

Phone: (306) 435-3592

Yorkton West

Kim Hextall

Phone: (306) 697-3079



Agriculture and
Agri-Food Canada

Agriculture et
Agroalimentaire Canada



Ducks Unlimited Canada



Saskatchewan
Agriculture
and Food



Saskatchewan
Watershed
Authority

Funding for this partnership provided by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada’s Greencover Canada Program.

Canada



Government of
Saskatchewan