BeefTalk 675: Annual Forages Make Choice Yearling Steers

Take Home Point

Adding annual crops to a perennial grazing system for steers at the Dickinson Research Extension Center improved steer grazing performance, shortened time on feed and improved carcass merit at harvest.

Feeding yearling steers on grass is a plus, but adding annual forage is even better.

All hands on deck! The Dickinson Research Extension Center is hosting a Beef Cattle and Forage Day on Monday, Aug. 19. Like many cattle events, producers like to come to see what is going on.

The beef industry has been a site/sight-specific industry for a long time. However, these words can have two meanings. Site-specific is relative to location, while sight-specific is the need to physically see what is going on. In reality, both are right. Beef production is site-specific and beef producers like to see what is going on, so all are invited.

The focus of the event will be on cattle and grass. The grass part is perhaps a little more broad based because annual crops also will be noted. The topics of the day will interweave soil, soil health, grass, annual crops and beef.

Starting with soil, the obvious is not always the obvious because there is a lot going on under our feet. The cattle may not appreciate all the effort that goes into keeping high-quality forage in place, but it is critical to a beef operation.

The center's beef program under the leadership of Doug Landblom, Dickinson REC animal scientist, has been managing yearling steers the last couple of years. The steers are overwintered on a growing ration that has kept gains to less than a pound a day.

Basically, the steers have had access to cornfields and supplemental forage. Their health and vigor has been excellent, but they're just not growing very fast.

One-third of the steers were sent directly to the feedlot in early spring and harvested in early fall. The other two-thirds of the steers were turned out to cool-season grass followed by warm-season grass.

SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Full Color Graphic
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The grass steers then were divided. Half of the steers were removed from the warm-season grass and sent to graze on annual crops until the end of the grazing season in late October. All the grass steers were shipped to the feedlot in November and essentially harvested in early winter.

The steers that grazed on annual forages where harvested about a month earlier than those steers that were on perennial grass. The thought behind the research was to evaluate the potential to keep steers on the home place longer than traditionally done, which is to background the weaned calves through the winter months and then send them to the feedlot.

In visiting with Doug, these past couple of years may have been a little tough on the traditional system because of escalating feed prices, but it is what it is.

The center lost about $300 a head on those early feedlot steers. Their performance was fair. They gained 3.8 pounds a day, had feed conversions of 6.9 pounds fed per pound of gain and an average yield grade of 2.4, and graded out at 65.6 percent choice quality or better.

The internal debate tends to center on the grass steers versus a traditional cow-calf system, which keeps all the grass for the cows and calves. In this case, some of the grass that traditionally would have been fed to the cows and calves was fed to last year's steers, which forced a reduction in cow-calf pairs.

Was that wise? The answer remains elusive for now because the more immediate question was the performance of the yearling steers on grass. Those steers that were on perennial grass averaged gains of 1.7 pounds per day for the grazing season. Once they arrived at the feedlot, they gained 4.6 pounds a day. They had a feed conversion of 6.2 pounds fed per pound of gain, with an average yield grade of 2.9, and graded out at 82.1 percent choice quality or better. These steers lost the center $30 per head.

The steers that were allowed to graze on higher-quality annual forage from mid-August until the end of the grazing season averaged gains of 2.2 pounds per day for the grazing season. Once they arrived in the feedlot, they gained 4.4 pounds a day, had a feed conversion of 6.2 pounds fed per pound of gain and an average yield grade of 2.8, and graded out at 86.5 percent choice quality or better. The center made $9 per head on this set of steers.

There was no difference in meat tenderness or sensory panel evaluations of any steers from the three management systems. What does it all mean? Grass works and steer calves make good yearlings.

If kept as yearlings, at least for this set of steers, the grass steers added about 140 pounds more live weight at harvest or just less than 80 pounds more hot carcass weight. The grass cattle also graded higher, with about 17 percent more choice grade or higher carcasses.

Those steers allowed to graze annual crops had the greatest percentage of choice grade or higher and the shortest days in the feedlot, so feeding yearling steers on grass is a plus, but adding annual forage is even better.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at http://www.BeefTalk.com. For more information, contact the NDBCIA Office, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601, or go to http://www.CHAPS2000.com on the Internet.