

## Option Processing — How to Use Forages for Fall Cattle Grazing

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Time Out! Information overload is a prevalent syndrome in agriculture. The real challenge is how to decide what information is valuable and then put that information to use.

Some information within the beef industry changes rapidly, is difficult to obtain and may be based on hunches intuition and deduction as much as fact. On the other hand, the office shelf can overflow with words. As ranches grow in focus and diversify in challenges, management needs to reach to new levels for information to sort out the options available for every answer.

At the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center, the current struggle is to maintain grass after an August that had an average high of 88 degrees and only a trace of precipitation on a couple of days. Rains did finally come during the first week of September, but there is little hope to make up for the lost forage production of August.

The center focuses on four main forage types: cool season grasses (like crested wheat), native summer pastures, annual forages (like corn, oats, and forage barley) and crop residue. Our struggles at this time of year focus on lengthening the stretch from depleted summer pastures to the inevitable feeding of harvested hay.

Some time ago, we shifted away from harvested forage toward ways of letting cows do the work. But breaking tradition does not come without pain.

In reviewing 2001 North Dakota custom rates compiled by the North Dakota Agricultural Statistics Service, the current estimate of putting up hay in North Dakota is \$7.06 per acre for mowing and conditioning and \$6.88 for putting up a round bale weighing more than 1,500 pounds. A lighter round bale averages \$5.71. Every bale that needs to be hauled will cost 12 to 18 cents per ton per mile. At 15 cents per ton per mile with a 10-mile haul, transportation cost is \$1.50 per ton. The total preprocessing cost per ton of hay would be \$15.44 assuming 1 ton per acre.

I do not have current estimates on feed processing

and delivery costs, hay wastage or other associated costs of winter feeding. However, the USDA Economic Research Service lists a capital recovery (fixed) cost of machinery and equipment charge of \$74.76 per cow in 1998 and \$73.16 in 1999 for the northern Great Plains which is approximately 13 percent of the economic cost (excluding labor) of raising cattle.

In the Northern Plains, the majority of equipment is focused on withstanding the force of winter. If the center sets aside 3 tons of hay per cow per winter, we will have \$46.32 in hay preprocessing charges against each cow. The average North Dakota Farm Business Management beef cow/calf enterprise's production cost for 2000 was \$340.75. That means 14 percent of the cow herd costs are in putting up hay.

If you look at the costs of making hay and the costs of owning machinery as outlined above, is it any wonder that I entertained the question of not replacing the harvesting equipment? Was that a wise decision? Maybe, maybe not.

Even as manager at a research facility, I find that many questions are not answered here in North Dakota. For instance, what do you do when forages are allowed to grow, but cattle are not there, ready to eat them? Our current dilemma is what to do with the corn crop. We estimate the corn will provide 2.5 to 3 tons of dry matter per acre. How to we manage the cattle as they graze to make the most of that resource? That question raises additional interesting questions but few answers. Through the combination of windbreaks, creative fencing and .05 to 0.1 acres per cow and calf, we are about to find out.

Stay tuned. May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at [www.Beeftalk.com](http://www.Beeftalk.com). For more information, contact the North Dakota Beef Cattle Improvement Association, 1133 State Avenue, Dickinson, ND 58601 or go to [www.CHAPS2000.com](http://www.CHAPS2000.com) on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0057.

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## Haying, Machinery and Equipment Cost Estimates for Northern Cattle Operations

Mowing and Conditioning <sup>1</sup>	\$ 7.06 per acre
Baling Round Bales over 1,500 lbs <sup>1</sup>	\$ 5.71 per bale
Hay Transportation <sup>1</sup>	\$ .15 per mile per ton
Capital Recovery, Cost of Machinery and Equipment <sup>2</sup>	\$ 73.96 per cow

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<sup>1</sup> North Dakota Agricultural Statistics Service

<sup>2</sup> USDA Economic Research Service