

BeefTalk: Cows as Combines

Fall aftermath grazing helps cows increase their conditioning and be better prepared for winter and next year's calving and breeding.

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Cows are harvesters, sort of a biological combine, and dining on crop aftermath can be a real component to profitable commercial beef production.

Yes, bison, yaks and many other four-legged precursors were company competitors, but as far as production units, the cow combines win out. Cow combine units come in various colors, depending on the dealer one chooses, but all have pretty good track records.

Mixing and matching the header unit with the combine unit is possible and certainly a producer's choice, realizing that many producers prefer a solid-colored unit. But keep in mind, the performance level of the mixed unit seems to have more production capacity than the straight units.

The use of cows as biological combines is not new, and the Dickinson Research Extension Center has been studying the impact of extended grazing in extensive beef cattle operations for many years. All these studies have a common outcome; that is, cow-calf producers tend to underutilize their cows when harvesting forage. Some harvesting opportunities simply never are utilized.

More recently, beginning in 2016, center scientists Songul Senturklu and Doug Landblom tested several harvesting units under various scenarios. The results were amazing. The units that only harvested grass were more expensive because their overwintering costs were greater, \$209 per unit. Interestingly, finding some more cropland and cover crop to harvest into the fall reduced wintering costs by almost a third (32.5 percent), to \$141.

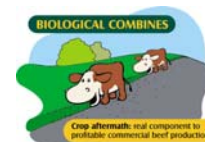
So, carrying that thought farther, letting those harvesting units go around the agronomic fields a second or third time and complete a late harvest of standing summer grass growth cut the overwinter charges by more than two-thirds (65.1 percent), to \$73. No question about it: The cow is the vehicle to harvest fall plant growth.

This win-win scenario lowers costs and improves production maintenance of the cow. That leads to another thought: Cows need to be in good condition at calving next spring and even better condition at breeding next summer.

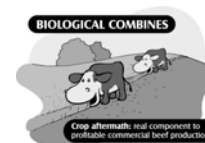
The middle three months of gestation, or pregnancy, in other words, are the time to improve cow condition. Can this be accomplished while the cows are harvesting well into later fall to early winter?

The answer is "yes," but keep in mind that herd management and calving dates also need to focus on grazing. In other words, calve on growing grass in the spring to maximize a cow's grazing potential.

Images



Crop aftermath: real component to profitable commercial beef production - Biological Combines



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But fall crop aftermath grazing is beneficial regardless of calving time. Right now, cow milk production is decreasing for spring-calving cows, the weather is favorable and, generally, crop aftermath is bountiful. When moisture tends to run short, grain production acreage often is shifted into potential cow feed.

While crop production has many variables, standing plants are meant to be tasted. I always ponder, when I drive by fields that are not fenced nor have access to water, how much a cow would enjoy that field. A moderate-milking, 1,300-pound cow would like to eat her fill of good, green grass prior to weaning, actually eating all that she can to produce milk.

After weaning, that same cow keeps eating if feed is available. When a cow eats above her requirements, she gains weight. In this case, replacing the weight she lost raising her calf, along with adding more body condition (commonly called fat) in preparation for winter, is the hoped-for scenario. Now that is the scenario cow-calf producers like.

Because the third trimester of gestation has not been reached, milk production ceases at weaning and good weather provides the opportunity to utilize cheaper feed resources. Essentially, the cow will eat in excess of her requirements in the crop aftermath buffet.

In addition, a good management option is to sort the thinner cows and send them to the best fall pastures. One scenario is to consider weaning the calves of those cows early, reducing the milking stress on their mothers. The fall pastures will put the needed feed in front of the thinner cows and the cows will improve their body condition score.

In the meantime, the moderately to heavier-conditioned cows can be grazing areas that are less lush. However, most producers will let all their cows enjoy fall aftermath grazing, keeping life simple. All the cows should respond with increased conditioning and be better prepared for winter and next year's calving and breeding.

Remember that when the third trimester of pregnancy starts, rebalance the ration and involve your local nutritionist to develop a proper herd nutritional program. Also remember to keep an eye on the cattle, identify potential fall plant toxicity and visit your local Extension agent, particularly if you are implementing new grazing strategies. Input is always good.

May you find all your ear tags.


For more information, contact your local NDSU Extension Service agent (<https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/extension/directory>) or Ringwall at the Dickinson Research Extension Center, 1041 State Ave., Dickinson, ND 58601; 701-456-1103; or kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu.

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Attachments

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