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NDSU Extension Service

BeefTalk: Have You Investigated All the Options of Beef Production?

By Kris Ringwall, Extension Beef Specialist,

I watch the weather daily longing for spring like a young boy longs for sunshine on a summer day.

Most likely, we have all wished for old man winter to move on and let the green grass of spring sprout. However, are we ready for the challenges of another growing season? Will our best-laid plans be enough? Each year brings opportunity, but too often our conservative connections with the past hold us back from making changes we know need to be made.

At the North Dakota Dickinson Research Extension Center Ranch, our concern is focus. The beef business is an affair with the land. Producer success is a function of the ability to utilize an allotted piece of ground

through plant, animal or recreational outputs -- or a combination of the three. At the Center, our two options of plant versus animal (in this case beef cows) are annually debated. Perhaps this is why the terms ranch versus farm originated. The farm was heavily dependent on plants and the ranch more dependent on animals. In the past, however, neither was exclusively plant or animal. Today, producers are slowly moving toward specialization.

For the Center, we quit maintaining a combine, and from there successively reduced the inventory of cropping equipment. Land was switched from producing grain crops to the production of forage crops. As the grain farmer is deciding which cash crop or variety to produce, the beef producer must decide on which forage to produce. The choices are more diverse than most people realize.

In a broad sense, spring produces cool season plants, summer grows warm season plants and fall blooms cool season plants. These plants could be perennials, biannuals, or annuals. The plants could be grazed, harvested as hay to be moved, harvested as hay but not moved or left as standing winter forage. These options call for management decisions which could ultimately affect profitability.

What makes these decisions difficult is in most cases the operation is land-locked. Additional acres may be unavailable. More cows produce more income, which means converting crop and hay land to grazing, with the intent to purchase hay in lieu of land.

Successful planning requires a thorough review of production potential, cash grain, forage, input costs, income potential and other factors. It is not easy, but by completing the planning procedure, producers can make the

decisions which will benefit their operation, their livestock (beef cows) and the land resources in their operation.

At the Center, we have annually discussed the direction to take. Let me provide two options for the management of a 4,640 acre ranch with 400 acres of crested wheatgrass, 2840 acres of native range land and 1350 acres of crop land.

- Option 1: Stock this ranch at 252 cow/calf pairs and harvest 27,000 bushels of cash grain and 118 tons of hay. The operation would still need to purchase 512 tons of hay.
- Option 2: Utilize the forage base to increase cow numbers to 388. This would require the ranch to terminate the cash grain operation and convert the grain acreage to forage production. Grazed acreage would include 388 acres of crested wheat, 2840 acres of native range, 486 acres of annual forage and 388 acres of standing corn. Weaned calf and winter cow needs would be met by 476 acres of annual forage cut in the milk stage.

Which option would you take, traditional or switch to a forage base? May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at 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 on the Internet. In correspondence about this column, refer to BT0028.

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Weighing the Options at NDSU's Dickinson Research Extension Center

Land needs for ranch center managed for 252 cow/calf pairs and 27,000 bushels of cash grain

December thru May

630 tons of hay production from
148 acres crested wheat plus
512 tons purchased

June thru mid October

252 acres crested wheat
2840 acres of native grass
1350 acres of cash grain

Mid October thru November

1350 acres of crop aftermath

Land needs for ranch center managed for 388 cow/calf pairs and no cash grain

December thru May

990 tons of hay produced from
488 acres of cereal crop

June thru mid October

388 acres of crested wheat
2840 acres of native grass
486 acres of grazed annual cereal grain

Mid October thru November

388 acres of standing corn

Data courtesy of Lee Manske, DREC Range Scientist

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