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BeefTalk: Farming, Ranching or Somewhere in Between

A successful land-based operation involves integrating crops and livestock.

By Kris Ringwall, Beef Specialist

NDSU Extension Service

Producers welcomed spring snow and rain this week in preparation for maintaining or even increasing cattle inventory for the coming year.

The extra heifers may find some good pasture this summer and, we hope, turn up pregnant this fall.

The moisture impacts land use, which is a serious topic and central to the future for beef production management options. Input for land use management options often is followed by discussion, decision and implementation because

Images

Ranching is a Balance Among Land, Grass and Beef

How much grass is available and how many cows can the ranch run?



Ranching is a Balance Among Land, Grass and Beef - How much grass is available and how many cows can the ranch run?

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[Spotlight on Economics: Spotlight on Economics: Soybean Export Growth Opportunities and Quality](#) (2016-04-27)

An important issue confronting exports of soybean is the protein content, which varies across regions and through time. [FULL STORY](#)

[BeefTalk: BeefTalk: Urgent: Obtain a Well-balanced Mineral Program With Magnesium Now!](#) (2016-05-05) Grass tetany is difficult to detect early, so make sure cows have sufficient supplementation. [FULL STORY](#)

[Prairie Fare: Prairie Fare: Freezer Meals Speed Summertime Cooking](#)

land is used for direct grazing or the production of feed.

At the North Dakota State University Dickinson Research Extension Center (DREC), the issue of how to integrate crop, forage and grass production to meet the needs of the cow herd is the focus of current discussions. How much grass is available? How many cows can the ranch run? Can traditional cropping systems feed cows?

The focus of the center's efforts involves the integration of forage production and the various opportunities to harvest that forage by mechanical or living means. Doug Landblom, DREC animal scientist, said several approaches have been utilized to explore the opportunity of integrating crops and livestock.

These efforts at the integration of crops and livestock include the traditional option of feeding hay and supplement in confined paddocks following summer and aftermath grazing, but that is not the only option. More recently, pasturing cattle well past traditional aftermath grazing in the fall certainly has expanded the center's insight into cattle production.

Cows in confinement and utilizing a sequence of forages by grazing cover crop mixtures, followed by corn and sunflower residues, or grazing stockpiled crested wheat, brome grass and other mixed plant types, followed by corn residue, offer

(2016-05-05) The idea is to spend a day preparing enough meals to feed you or your family for two weeks up to two months. [FULL STORY](#)

[Small-business Savvy: Small-business Savvy: Know Why You Are in Business](#) (2016-05-05) Understanding why you are in business helps you make decisions and chart your course into the future. [FULL STORY](#)

use of releases

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expanded opportunities to cattle producers. The longer the cows can be the living harvesters, the less need for mechanical intervention.

What does this mean? The cows are doing the work, so we can delay the feeding of mechanically harvested feedstuffs and spend less on labor. Additionally, calves and yearlings are harvesting warm- and cool-season annuals after early grazing of cool-season grasses and summer grazing of native grass.

This yearlong, thorough integration of multiple forages with several types of cattle certainly challenges traditional thinking. Cattle are no longer simple users of pasture; they have been promoted to be the primary harvesters within the pasture and cropping systems. This research at the center has producers sitting on the edge of their chair, waiting for the preliminary stocking rate estimates of the various forages.

Sound science is the basis of the estimates, but regardless of how sound the science is, this integration has many unknowns. In the end, each eco-site, or one could say soil type, has only so much capacity to produce vegetation. The vegetation (which producers call forage) needs timely precipitation. Not all the production is available for consumption and, depending on past usage, not all the production has the same value.

The center's research is actively challenging the

land base to produce more beef through implemented forage grazing systems that place all cattle on pastures, on fields, on crops, on residues and only occasionally in dry lots. However, discussions will follow. Additional input will be obtained and decisions will be made to get a handle on cattle costs, which means an inventory of all the ranch's base units, including grass, crop and forage acres.

In closing, 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 some combination of plant and animal outputs.

At the center, plant plus animal (not plant vs. animal) is explored annually. Perhaps this is how the term "ranch vs. 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 slowly are moving toward specialization. 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.

A successful land-based operation in the future must review all land-based production potential through grain, forage and animal production, including input costs and income. Given the current rains in southwestern North Dakota, the center

once again will ponder the use of all potentially bountiful plant resources from the land, and so should producers.

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](mailto:kris.ringwall@ndsu.edu).

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Attachments



[PDF - Ranching is a Balance Among Land, Grass and Beef - How much grass is available and how many cows can the ranch run?](#)

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[EPS - Ranching is a Balance Among Land, Grass and Beef - How much grass is available and how many cows can the ranch run?](#)

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