

News Column

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GRAZING CROP RESIDUE

I grew up on a livestock operation, with every acre surrounded by a permanent fence. At some time during the year, every acre was grazed. Dad planted sudan to graze. We grazed our wheat, our alfalfa, and every acre of milo stubble.

Sometimes we even grazed the neighbor's field across the road — the fences were never quite good enough.

Some crop farmers won't allow livestock to graze their fields, believing cattle will pack the soil and reduce yields the following year. While that can be true if cattle are left on fields too long in the spring, research doesn't agree with the reduced yield theory when grazing is managed properly.

Research at the University of Nebraska – done the first time about 30 years ago and repeated 10 years ago – shows no detrimental effect on subsequent grain yields from grazing stalks. Their work was on irrigated corn fields and actually showed a slight increase in corn and soybean yields the summer after grazing corn stalks in the fall or winter.

When I rent corn stalks to a neighboring cattle producer I stipulate that cattle are to be removed by February 1. I choose February 1 as the final removal date because that should allow time for more freezing and thawing to correct any surface compaction that might have occurred during grazing.

I don't want cattle on fields during the rainy spring season. Compaction isn't my main

concern if grazing later in the spring. Instead, I'm worried about hoof prints left in muddy fields – I don't want an uneven surface to plant into.

Forage quality will be best soon after harvest and will decline as time passes. Corn and milo stalks are best when utilized in November and December, however I am comfortable grazing through January if the weather isn't bad and the cattle still look good.

One acre of corn or milo stalks will have enough residue to carry one cow for one month, assuming a 100 bushel per acre grain yield. Because residue yield correlates strongly with grain yield, a 200 bushel per acre corn crop will have twice as much residue as a 100 bushel per acre crop and would therefore feed two cows for one month (or one cow for two months).

Knowing the carrying capacity is important if you have a neighbor wanting to rent your stalks. I prefer renting on a per head per day basis to encourage the cattle producer to use what is there and then get off my fields. If they want to pay on a per acre basis, I calculate the per acre fee according to the expected carrying capacity,...and give them a date when the cattle have to be removed.

While I prefer renting on a per head per day basis, I rent stalks to a neighbor in Phillips County on a per acre basis because my field adjoins his and the cattle can walk back home for water if he grazes it all together. I calculated the rent based on the expected carrying capacity, then told him what I expected,... and that he was getting a great deal.

I am intentionally not printing a stalk rental rate in this article because I don't have a good source that tells me what everyone is paying. Call me though, if you want, and I'll tell you what I've heard,...and why cattlemen could pay more and it would still be cheaper than feeding hay.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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