

News Column

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GRAZING COVER CROPS – FEBRUARY 27

My absolute favorite thing to do as a kid was to ride along with my dad to check cows. When I was really young it was a Sunday afternoon event for the whole family, checking the “south pasture” in the car. By my teenage years it was usually just Dad and me in a pickup truck.

One spring and early summer we were artificially inseminating a set of cows about seven miles from home, so we spent a lot of time in the truck, checking heat twice a day. By mid-summer I had a dark suntan on my right arm and Dad had an even darker tan on his left arm. He drove, so his left arm rested on the frame of his open window. I was the passenger, with my right arm exposed to the sun.

I learned a lot from my dad during our many hours of truck time. One lesson he taught me is that the most profitable cow is the one you don’t have to feed.

One day when we were checking cows we found the same old cow, grazing on the wrong side of the fence. By now she had a name that I won’t repeat, but Dad called her by name, then looked over at me and said, “You know, she’s the most profitable cow on the place. We never have to feed her because she’s always out.”

Ethically, I’m a little uncomfortable with the idea of making money by just letting my cows get out and graze on the neighbor’s fields. However, I really like the idea of making more money by letting cows graze more days during the year instead of hauling harvested feed to them.

Most of you have heard, or read, my rant about sizing a cowherd to fit available crop

residue, instead of owning just as many cows as will fit in the pastures you can locate,... and then hauling feed to them all winter. I like cheap winter feed – crop residue and anything else that can be grazed.

With the recent trend of planting cover crops to improve soil health, prevent erosion, and hopefully improve crop yields, cattlemen have a great opportunity to cut winter feed costs. In my mind, grazing is always cheaper than swathing, baling, and hauling feed. Why not graze those cover crops?

In practice, many cover crops are actually being planted for livestock grazing, with soil health and erosion control just being side benefits. Whether it is a cover crop that you graze, or a forage planted to graze that provide a little cover, it's all the same to me. We can call it a cover crop and make money by putting cattle on it.

While grazing cover crops (or planted forage crops) isn't new, managing the grazing to benefit the cattle and the subsequent cash crop takes a bit of skill. And, with that thought in mind, we scheduled a panel of farmers/cattlemen to present our next coffee shop meeting on Grazing Cover Crops.

Mark Sylvester, Justin Visser, and Russ Taddiken will be in the hot seat at the next Coffee Shop meeting, scheduled for 10:30 a.m. on February 27 at Nelson's Landing in Leonardville. Each has several years experience grazing cover crops.

Mark and Justin farm and graze cattle in the Leonardville and Riley areas. Russ comes to us from Clay County, near Morganville. We'll ask each of them to describe their operation, and how they utilize cover crops. What I think I know is that Justin moves a lot of electric fence and employs more of a mob grazing system, while Mark is more likely to graze whole fields.

I haven't seen Russ's operation, but I know some of you have. Russ was a 4-Her during

my days in Clay County and he married another former 4-Her from Clay County. With his 4-H experience and having inherited his dad's public speaking skills, I expect Russ to be pretty comfortable in front of a group.

I'm really looking forward to this meeting. I think these guys will do a great job and I'm anxious to learn from them. I hope you can join us too!

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 gmclure@ksu.edu.

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