



**FOOTHILLS FORAGE
AND GRAZING ASSOCIATION**

Innovation, education and regenerative agriculture

Unit 4A, 710 Centre St. SE, High River, AB T1V 0H3

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GRASSROOTS NEWS & VIEWS JANUARY 2021

Director's Note - Emily Lowe

Well here we are,

Back at the beginning of another year; waiting on calves and waiting on the growing season. Many of us have been anticipating 2021 for a while now. I sure don't have to tell any of you that 2020 had its challenges. It might sound cliché if I write about learnings from the year, but let's be real, here I go:

Trust the process: In the spring of 2020, my husband and I began re establishing forages on a chunk of what has been a farm field for the last 30+ years. After watching every single plant that was ever sown in that field emerge, long before any sign of what we had intentionally planted, it's safe to say that frustrations were high. But as most of you know, it is a process. Allowing the forage species time to root down, grow and begin to encroach on the volunteer species does not happen over night. I think the same mindset can be applied to many things in life.

What you want to see in six weeks, six months, six years, depends on what you do today: How does the old saying go? The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago; the second best is today. Looking forward, what do you want your operation to look like in the future, and what can you do today to start moving in that direction? This is

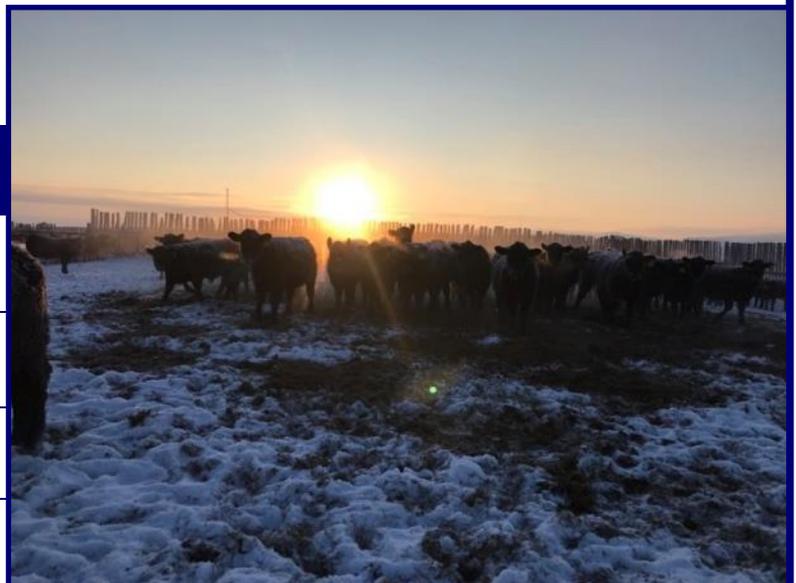
a question my husband and I ask ourselves daily. 2020 really gave us the time to think strategically while we were both, more or less, stuck at home.

It's easier to grow with others who are growing in the same direction: If you are receiving this newsletter, this is probably something you are already well aware of. As a relatively new director for FFGA, I am really excited to connect further with our membership through our future events! (Fingers crossed for in person!)

Looking into 2021, how will you be making it different than 2020 on your operation? Good luck to all of you. Here's hoping for rain, sunshine and continued growth. From all of us at FFGA, Happy New Year, and we hope to see you soon!

Emily Lowe

Early mornings at Granite Cattle near Nanton, AB



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Grazing For Soil Health



Mike Williams (Photo by Kat Merrick)

Few ranchers would envy Michael Williams. His Diamond W Cattle Co. operates under some of the harshest environmental conditions at the outskirts of one of the largest metropolitan areas in the U.S. That combination of challenges makes Williams' grazing strategies crucial.

But, grazing management, regardless of environment, is critical to the success of any ranch.

"Grazing is often the most overlooked aspect of ranching," says Ken Tate, professor and rangeland watershed specialist at the University of California, Davis.

"Every ranch should have a grazing management plan that works for them," he says. "If you're not doing that, it doesn't matter how good your cattle ge-

netics are or how good your health program is. If you're not sufficiently harvesting forage and maximizing livestock's capacities to use what that land is equipped to grow, those other investments are not going to be optimized."

Williams' Diamond W consists of 12,000 acres in the mountains northeast of Los Angeles. With elevations ranging from 3,000' to 5,000', the rangeland typically only receives 10" to 15" of rainfall each year.

"For a long time I was spoiled because I was on a pretty good ranch with good grass that helped during the drought. But the Thomas fire burned me out," Williams says of the December 2017 blaze in California's Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. Since then he has consolidated his ranch to the mountains in Los Angeles county with an emphasis on managed grazing.

"I'm improving my stockmanship skills and training my cattle to stay together as a single herd. Depending on the resources and the time of year, I may split them into a couple of herds, but the idea is to keep them together and let them graze as a group rather than letting them spread across the ranch as they would normally do," he says.

The objective is to implement rotational grazing without cross fences so cattle graze the range more evenly and allow the grass to have rest periods. Williams says he rides horseback for three hours every three days moving the cattle in a low-stress manner.

"You can rekindle the herding instinct in the cattle that's natural where

they'll stay together as a herd as long as they have water and feed. As you gain their trust and confidence you can exercise increasing control where they'll stay in an area until the resources are exhausted," he says. "That way I can manipulate their impact on my pastures."

Williams is currently evaluating the time he is devoting to such a grazing system, but says he thinks it's favorable to the alternative.

"If my cows are spread out over a few thousand acres, I can spend nearly all day driving around in a pickup checking on them," he says. "But I'm learning that with my system of moving cattle horseback, I can see every animal, and as I get more familiar with the system and the cows get more familiar, that flips over to where it's less time intensive and less resource intensive."

Diamond W Cattle Co. is an example of the image beef industry leaders hope to impress on consumers — that ranchers are good stewards of the land and the animals. Beef production has come under scrutiny for its environmental impact, though that impact is often erroneously reported.

Grazing lands occupy nearly half of the Earth's land area, provide the livelihood for millions and reduce the effects of climate change by storing massive amounts of carbon. Tate says maintaining and restoring the soil health on ranches is essential for the future of livestock production.

"Proper grazing helps every phase of the operation," he says. "If you're good at grazing management you'll improve total forage production and the efficien-

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On the Cover: Some curious cows joined in the fun at the Perennial Pasture Rejuvenation Field Day in Madden, AB Photo: Sonja Bloom

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cy of harvesting that forage. That will lead to improved animal performance and greater returns.”

By definition, that’s what industry leaders, retailers and food service companies want to show consumers about beef’s sustainability.

“In California we’re going to work on the aspects of sustainability that bring value to the ranch, things like grazing, soil health and plant community health” Tate says.

California ranchers have seen firsthand how grazing practices are able to provide benefits during extreme

weather events. Healthier soils hold more water and are resilient to drought.

“We might be able to stay green a little longer on well-managed pastures with less water,” Tate says. “Ranchers are interested in that idea.”

Similarly, over-stocked ranges and pastures tend to suffer financially as cattle performance suffers.

“Ranches that are consistently over-stocked are just creating their own drought every year,” Tate says.

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Author: Greg Henderson. Original article can be found at <https://www.drovers.com/news/grazing-soil-health>

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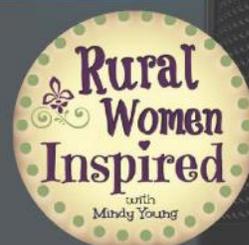
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Increasing Cow-calf Profitability Through Management



Stock Photo: Pixabay

When it comes to the cow-calf segment of the beef industry, there are a number of strategies producers can look at in order to be successful, especially since this segment is unique.

Tanner Aherin, with CattleFax, primarily focuses on research and analysis for all sectors of the cattle industry and the poultry markets, in addition to covering cow-calf and stocker members in the Southeast. He spoke during the Stockmanship and Stewardship Virtual event Nov. 11 and 12. The event was a two-day educational experience featuring low-stress cattle handling demonstrations, Beef Quality Assurance educational sessions and facility design sessions.

“You’re more of a fixed cost op-

erator as opposed to being a margin operator like you would see at the feed yard level, even at the packing segment, or a stocker operator back-grounder or would be,” Aherin said.

Those segments are more market operators—as they can buy cheap inventory and sell higher or buy the next round cheaper.

“Whereas if you’re a cow calf operator, you pretty much every year have consistent fixed costs,” he said.

Considering some of the most successful cow-calf operators in terms of high return producers, Aherin said they concentrate on nutrition, genetics and the health of their herd. This focus affects their calf crop through fertility and reproductive efficiency and the amount of money they earn.

Once a producer has a solid set of calves, it comes down to risk management and marketing of that calf crop to get the highest return on investment or the most money for those calves.

There are several ways to manage risk from a price standpoint and fixed costs. On the marketing side of an operation, producers definitely need to know their customers. Know their goals and ask if they’re buying to feed out, sell on a

grid or are they the type of customer who wants pounds. Or will a producer focus a little bit more on the clientele that wants high quality replacement females?

“If that’s the case then obviously your genetics, your herd should focus more on the maternal side,” he said. “And then obviously navigating the markets with seasonality and markets is critical.”

Aherin said, “all of that stuff is kind of irrelevant” if a producer doesn’t know what their break-even costs are or if they’re even profitable.

It’s absolutely critical to know costs and continue to measure them to be able to calculate what the breakeven looks like. Breakevens help with the profitability side of things, but it also helps to manage risk. If futures are going to be utilized, a producer needs to know where breakeven levels are to help decide whether or not to take a position with a futures contract.

“One reason why we’ve seen liquidation in the last couple years is because of poor margins for profitability, especially for your low return producer,” he said. “They’ve been losing money the last couple years or barely making any at all.”

Those high return producers

High return producers average cash cow cost is right around \$550, while the average producer is \$600 and the lower return ones can tack on a \$100 per head.

Some high return producers reach upper 80 to low 90 percentile of calves weaned per cow exposed. Aherin believes this is due mostly to running proven or older cows instead of first or second calf heifers.

“You’ll notice the last few years, your high return producers have had about a 3 to 4% advantage over your low return producers,” he said. “If you had 100 cows, that’s an extra three to four calves each year. At the same time, not only would you have more calves to market in the fall, you’d also have fewer replacements that you would need to restock.”

If it all goes back to nutrition, genetics and health, keep those things in check and any producer can maximize value.

“The bottom line is just your

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Membership Renewal

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high return producers find a way to be more efficient,” he said.

High return producers tend to calve during a tighter calving window. In their survey, almost half of them calved within 45 days. Eighty percent calve within 2 months.

Twenty percent of the lower return producers calved in two to three months, with almost another 10% taking more than 90 days. Aherin said those herds who calve quicker tend to have a more uniform calf crop with cows breeding back quicker, and thus having higher weaning weights. Their data suggests almost a 40-pound difference between 0 and 45 days calving versus 90 plus days.

“That can be anywhere from, \$60 to \$75 a head that you're missing out on,” he said. “And at the same time you're selling less weight and you're also selling fewer calves, as well, so it can really impact your bottom line.”

Keep an eye on the parents

That calf crop wouldn't exist for the cow-calf producer without females.

“Obviously they're the heart of your herd,” he said. “They're one of the most important pieces of their herd.”

Buying females down the road can be looked at in terms of how many 550-pound steer calves does it take to pay for a bred cow. In their survey, long term it was over one and a half steer calves.

The last 4 or 5 years it has been anywhere from 1.65 to 1.75 calves per bred cow. So if calves got up to “two bucks a pound in 2024,” Aherin said, they could reach \$1,100 a head. If that ratio continues for the long-term average, females might reach more than \$1,000.

Pushing that range to the upper end, like what happened in 2017 and into 2018—1.75 calves per bred cow—prices exceeded \$1,900 per female.

“So as you think about that, is your operation set up to be able to pay those prices for females on down the road, even if you're not expanding, if you're just buying the replacements?” Aherin said. “To keep your herd size steady, can you afford that on down the road, or are you setting yourself up?”

And don't forget about the bulls. One thing Aherin has noticed during the

last few years is as the bull prices have increased, so has the cash value. In 2019 producers paid anywhere from 2,500 to \$5,000 per bull and their calf value averaged about \$850 per head. There's value in the genetics and it's not a fluke when he runs the numbers.

“They keep that bull around for three years, he sires about 25 calves each year. That's nearly \$6,000 extra in your pocket,” he said. “Obviously it's going to cost a little more to buy that bull so that's not going to be straight profit. But, you know, that is something to consider. Don't skip out on genetics there, there's key variable when it comes to being the best cow-calf operations.”

Calves to market

Aherin said the final key to being a successful cow-calf operator is how the calves are marketed. Marketing options include taking them to the local auction barn, selling off the ranch, video auctions, forward contracting calves or retaining ownership. Based on their survey, 40 to 45% of producers still sell at the auction barn.

A lot of times when calves are sold at the sale barn, they're done so in the fall.

Now the cow-calf producer's main goal should be to do whatever they can to avoid selling and marketing in the fall without getting some source of price protection.

“Maybe you look at forward contracting during the summer months,” he said. “Maybe you use the futures for price protection if you are going to sell off.”

Aherin sees the need to find other options because of a pretty hefty dis-

count in the fall compared to other marketing opportunities. As he thinks about retained ownership, there's a lot of different avenues and ways to do so as a cow-calf producer.

“You can always dry lot them through the winter, put them on summer grass and eventually sell them and feed them as a fed animal the next winter or fall,” he said. “If you are going to decide to retain ownership you can't just wake up one morning decide that you're going to retain ownership and own your calves longer on most of the time.”

That doesn't work—you need to have a plan, according to Aherin. He wants to remind producers that retained ownership isn't managing their risk, it could potentially add to it the longer you own the calves. It's not necessarily a guarantee, but it does give the potential for more opportunity down the road.

“So if you are going to retain ownership, you needed to be thinking about the segments on down the supply chain and what those markets look like,” Aherin said.

Author: Kylene Scott can be reached at 620-227-1804 or kscott@hpi.com.

Article can be found at: https://www.hpi.com/livestock/increasing-cow-calf-profitability-through-management/article_6403cbf6-3b35-11eb-ba15-c3adc0586fa4.html

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Bale Grazing Checks The Boxes For Three Canadian Producers



Photo supplied

Beef farmers everywhere are looking to reduce costs, decrease their workload, and improve the carrying capacity of their pastures. Bale grazing is a production practice that can help.

There is a learning curve with any grazing method, especially when it's planned for winter, arguably one of the most unpredictable seasons. Three producers across Canada share their experiences with bale grazing, provide their top tips, and explain why extending the winter grazing period has been a game changer on their farms.

John Duynisveld operates a beef and sheep farm on 250 acres of pasture land on the north shore of Nova Scotia. He calves his herd of 25 to 30 cattle in May and June, and markets his grass-finished beef directly to consumers.

John says they started doing things differently on their farm after his dad attended a grazing seminar more than 30 years ago. Later, when he was working on his Master's degree, grazing management became a big focus once again. "As you delve into more ways of trying to extend your pasture and ways to be more cost effective and labour efficient, bale grazing becomes sort of an obvious choice," he says. They've been bale grazing for 20 years and purchase dry hay from a neighbour who sets the bales up in the field for Duynisveld.

"We lay the bales out in a strip 25 feet apart in one direction and 80 feet apart in the other," John explains. He uses electric fence to restrict cattle movement and typically moves them twice a week. "We choose fields that aren't overly steep and have a heavy soil that is good for binding nutrients." He adds that they move the strips where bales are placed each year and over time the pasture has demonstrated uniform fertility and growth.

Shifting away from barn feeding created a few pleasant surprises, including how clean his cattle stay while bale grazing outside of confinement. "I think it reflects well on the cattle's natural ability," he says, adding that cattle are fairly resilient. "One year we had about four feet of snow in the fields that we were bale grazing and it still worked," John remarks. Only the tops of the bales were visible and John used an axe to open up the bales but the cattle continued grazing.

Excess moisture can be a challenge, so John ensures bales are placed on the round sides rather than the flat end. He removes netwrap at that time as well. "If bales are on the flat end, they act like a sponge and soak up moisture, turning into a block of ice," he explains. He finds bale grazing helps mitigate mud problems during spring thaw and the fall period. "If you've done a good job on pasture management prior, you have a pretty good sod," he says, adding that giving his herd springtime access to areas they've already bale grazed also helps combat mud. "I'm surprised that more people don't do it," John concludes.

Top Tips

- Use narrow strips to quickly set up paddocks. "Long, narrow strips give you flexibility for grazing or bale grazing," John says. They use strips that tend to be 50 meters to 100 meters wide.

- Set up at least one extra wire (move) in advance. John's farm sometimes receives a heavy snow right around the freezing mark that will stick to poly wire, dragging it to the ground. "If you have one to two wires set up ahead and they do break in, they only have access to that," John adds.

- Stick fibreglass fence posts into the next row of bales, which eliminates the issue of pounding posts in frozen ground.

"We started bale grazing to cut down on our workload," says John Chuiko, explaining the motivation behind first implementing the practice on their farm 15 years ago. John and Deanne operate a 350 head cow-calf and long yearling operation, with calving taking place in May and June. They say bale grazing has helped them work as closely to nature as possible.

"Yardage costs go down and it's amazing what it does for our perennial pastures and for our soil and grass volume," he adds.

The Chuikos purchase their feed and set up enough bales in each pod to provide 20 days of grazing for their cattle. "All of our feed is weighed coming in so we know exactly how many pounds of forage is out there and how much our herd needs daily so we know how many days our pods should last," Deanne explains, but adds that it isn't a hard and fast rule. They use feed test results to help them build their pods, adding in greenfeed and hay of differing quality, depending on what they've purchased for that year. They use temporary electric fence to restrict access if their pods contain more than 20 days worth of feed.

The Chuikos set up bale pods in specific areas that need improvement. "With our planned grazing system we keep track of our grazing days in the summer time. We're in our pastures every day and we know where we need to add the nutrients and where we need fertility," Deanne says.

They have found bale grazing works with all types of cattle including bulls, market cows, yearlings and cow-calf pairs, as long as they have access to adequate shelter and water. They rely on natural shelter and point out that by placing bales 38 feet apart, that acts as a windbreak as well. "We keep our calves on a lot longer now until late March so our cow herd will always have access to water when calves are on them," John says. They work closely with their vet to ensure they are meeting the needs of their herd.

A challenge they need to work around is wildlife, particularly dealing with bale damage from elk herds. "I would love to put all of the hay out where I want to in October and get the net and twine off and be done, but that's leaving too much risk," John explains. They instead plan to first graze pods that are at greatest risk for elk damage or will wait to place bales on susceptible ground until it's closer to grazing time.

John and Deanne are clear that there is no "one size fits all" to planned grazing and bale grazing. "There's no recipe to follow that I see," John says. "Play around with it, see what works for you."

Top Tips

- "We'll take the tractor and plow a snow ridge and I'll build the fence in the

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3 Steps for Starting a Beef Herd



Photo: Sonja Bloom

Follow these steps to increase your changes of success.

Do you want to start a beef herd? Maybe you're just out of college, rejoining the family farming operation, and you want to expand. Perhaps you want to diversify your operation by adding more livestock.

Whatever the reason behind your decision, there are factors you'll want to consider and steps you should take to increase your chances of success.

MAKE A PLAN

Dan Loy, director of the Iowa Beef Center, says the first step is to put together a business plan. Few producers have the capital at their fingertips to start such an enterprise, and that means your first stop will likely be the bank. Bankers expect a complete, professional business plan for ag ventures, just like any other type of business, so break out an online template, and dot the i's and cross those t's.

"What resources do you bring and what resources do you need to acquire?" Loy asks. "Those are the questions to ask."

Patrick Wall, Iowa State University (ISU) Extension and Outreach beef specialist, suggests you make a plan and then work backward. "Many people buy a bull

and then figure out how to use him and hope someone buys the finished product," he says.

The process is a by-product of the commodity system: Grow food and hope someone buys it. Wall says it's no longer enough to sit at the sale barn and hope for a good price. "The first thing you need to do is figure out who your market is," he says.

There are many niche markets these days, ranging from local and online direct sales to raising recipient cows for embryo transfer, as well as contract sales and the open market. Wall says once the marketing options have been assessed and determined, then it's time to purchase cows and a bull that will genetically get you where you want to go.

"When you determine the customer first, you can build the product you need," he says.

ASSEMBLE A TEAM

From the vet to the feed rep. to the neighbor who'll help work cattle at peak times, know and enlist your team of experts. The first step here is knowing your own strengths and weaknesses. Were you good at nutrition in school? Or are you the risk-management expert? Look for people who will complement your strengths and fill in the gaps of your weaknesses.

Joe Sellers, ISU Extension beef specialist, says the newer, younger producer may want to look at partnering options to share costs and risk. Sharing offers a broad range of possibilities – from custom grazing to shared ownership of the herd. Sellers says there are no hard-and-fast rules on how labor and investment are divided, but be sure to include noncash contributions such as labor and owned pastureland as well as out-of-pocket costs. Many cow-share arrangements allow for

transfer of ownership over a period of time, an aspect especially attractive to beginning producers looking to build their own herds.

"In surveys we have done, 90% of young producers say their goal is to own their own cows," Sellers says. "A partnership arrangement early on can help build the financial resources to reach these long-term goals."

You can be creative, but he says make sure all terms are spelled out.

WEIGH YOUR PROGRESS

Keep good records. Know your cost of production and track your marketing success. Loy says if you are in a situation where you can generate closeouts, join a group where you can benchmark yourself against others. Then, review that information regularly.

He also suggests having a contingency plan. "If your plan doesn't pan out or if you are unable to survive the inevitable weather-related downturn, know when to get out or get help," Loy says. "There are advantages and disadvantages to farming as a way of making a living. Being independent and living in rural areas, the lifestyle is attractive. But you have to crunch the numbers and be realistic."

Author: Terri Queck-Matzie. Original article can be found at <https://www.agriculture.com/livestock/cattle/3-steps-for-starting-a-beef-herd>

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hardened snow ridge,” Deanne says, when they need to use electric fence to split up a pod.

• Remove netwrap and twine before it freezes to save time. Last year the Chuikos hired students who removed netwrap from 800 bales in a single afternoon.

• Bale grazing can help manage brush encroachment. “The cows did a nice number on them,” Deanne says, explaining how a bale grazing experiment worked in an area that was becoming overgrown with brush.

Hans Myhre runs a commercial and purebred Charolais operation near Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba. For the past 15 years, he has used bale grazing for part or all of the winter as a cost saving measure.

“I started looking at practices that could save winter costs,” Hans says. “When you figure it out, winter feeding is the biggest expense in the operation, so anything we could do to trim that is helpful,” he continues. He soon found the improvements were not limited to his bottom line. “As we went along you started to see the benefits to the land,” he explains, and adds that increased grazing capacity was obvious soon after implementation.

Over time, his extended grazing system has shifted and evolved. For example, when they first started, Hans only allowed cattle access to three or four days of feed, whereas now they allow their herd up to a month’s worth at a time. “If it is going to be more than a month’s [supply of] feed, we will select an extra site or put a temporary fence in,” he says.

They rotate their sites each winter, choosing places that will benefit from a fertility boost as well as areas that will provide shelter for his cows and herd bulls. “We look for sites that can provide natural shelter for cattle to get into,” Hans explains. Wind exposure is a challenge on his farm and while Hans would like to place bales on some sites, he avoids areas that are too exposed to west winds.

While they have used hay, Myhre primarily purchases bales of grass seed production by-products from timothy, rye grass or fescue. “It’s a lot cheaper than hay so you don’t worry about the waste so much,” Hans says and adds the extra residue cattle leave behind actually creates more improvement to the pasture. He tries to create a balanced ration by bale grazing and will incorporate low quality feed and supplement with silage or grain if needed. “Don’t think that you have to use high quality feed to do it. So-called waste might be higher on low quality stuff but the benefits you leave behind are higher with more residue,” Hans says. “It’s really surprising how much fertility and water holding capacity you can add into your pastures just by leaving all that residue,” Hans adds.

Top Tips

• When possible, buy bales that are bound with sisal string, which is a natural twine that will break down on its own over time. “I’d rather pay an extra \$1 a bale for sisal string than find someone to pay a dollar a bale to remove it,” Hans says.

• Place your bales in late summer or early fall. “We have ours set up now already and that hasn’t always happened,” Hans explains. “Sometimes we’ve had to plow through several feet of snow. It doesn’t make it impossible but it would increase your cost for one thing,” he adds.

Producers continue to discover new ways of incorporating bale grazing as a method to reduce expenses, improve forage stands, and extend grazing. Like any system, there is no right way or wrong way to bale graze and practical experience will shape how extended grazing works in the future.

Article from the Beef Cattle Research Council. Original can be found at <https://www.thecattlesite.com/articles/4449/bale-grazing-checks-the-boxes-for-three-canadian-producers/>

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