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## Extended grazing saves time and money — if done right

*Winter grazing is a simple concept, but the trick is in things like good body condition scores in fall and the right grazing sequence*



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Livestock

*Photo: File*

If you're swath grazing, spending a little more to get higher yield will actually lower your costs, says Vern Baron. Winter feeding cattle is a matter of using the right tool at the right time, says a federal forage specialist.



"Placing grazing methods in sequence is probably going to be the efficient method time after time to reduce risks and costs," said Vern

Baron, a research scientist with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

"In this day and age, we have to consider every feed and every piece of land we have on a farm to cut costs and to be efficient. There's a place for everything."

In most parts of the Prairies, cows are traditionally fed on a summer pasture, and winter feeding becomes "an expensive part of the feeding process," Baron said at the Farming Smarter conference last month.

"The summer pasture lasts from June to October, and there's 125 to 200 days of the winter where you have to feed," he said.

The cost of feeding 100 cows for 100 days in a traditional system ranges anywhere between \$15,000 and \$20,000. It's tough to get away from those costs, said Baron. But by extending the grazing season, producers can reduce winter feeding costs by reducing the cost to haul feed, harvest grain, and feed cattle.

*Vern Baron photo: File*

"We know that if we reduce that yardage cost, we're automatically going to reduce the cost of calf production, and extended grazing reduces yardage costs," said Baron.

"If we can take some or all of those costs away during the winter feeding period, we substantially reduce the cost of daily feed production."

But because every farm is different, "we can't say that one thing is better than another."

Vern Baron photo: File



“On the farm, you’re going to have to figure out what combination of all of these things works,” said Baron. “We can probably put weight most easily on cows by stockpile grazing in the fall when the quality is high, then have cows in good shape going into winter on swath grazing. And perhaps we have to increase the amount of bale grazing we’re using as winter conditions dictate.”

## Start strong

Stockpile grazing — or grazing pasture regrowth in the late fall and early winter — can save producers money if done properly, said Baron.

“Stockpile grass has pretty high quality, but it’s a matter of placing it in a winter feeding system so we get the most out of it,” he said.

The trick is to send cows into the fall with good body condition scores.

“We know that it takes a cow more energy per day to survive and maintain her weight when she’s out there foraging in snow, compared to standing at a feed bunk, so it’s not unusual that cows would lose weight,” he said, adding cows are “particularly vulnerable” in the late stages of pregnancy.

“We can accept that cows lose weight if we start them on pasture in good condition, so long as we keep their body weight up.”

Once the snow is too deep, producers can then move to swath grazing — a feeding system where the cows graze on swaths of annual crops, usually cereals.

Swath grazing can reduce daily feeding costs per cow by 41 to 48 per cent, but that depends largely on the carrying capacity of the grains being grazed.

“High yield equals high carrying capacity, and that should lower your costs,” said Baron. “You should strive for yield if you want to reduce your feed costs per day.”

In a side-by-side comparison of two crops, “the one with the higher yield and carrying capacity is probably going to cost the least,” he said.

“When we plant barley in the middle of June, it’s going to yield somewhere around 6,000 pounds per acre in dry matter, and that’s going to get us somewhere around 250 cow days an acre or 600 cow days a hectare,” he said.

“Triticale costs a little more than barley to grow, but the cost per kilogram of dry matter is going to be about half as much. That feed can carry you about twice as far.”

But producers shouldn’t sacrifice quality or yield just to cut costs, he added.

“In the beef industry, we have this desire to cut costs above all else. And there’s nothing wrong with that,” said Baron. “But you have to temper the desire to cut costs to zero with what it takes to attain a yield and maximized carrying capacity if we want to reduce the daily feeding costs.”