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## Crop type one factor in swath grazing economics

*Some crops cost more to grow but provide more energy and a higher carrying capacity*

Posted Jan. 14th, 2016 by [Barb Glen](#)

Taking feed to the cows or taking cows to the feed: for cow-calf producers, one of those tasks is going to be necessary every winter.

Managing that in an economical way is the challenge.

Agriculture Canada research scientist Vern Baron says bringing cows to the feed often has the lowest cost, but many producers use a combination of stored feed and swath or bale grazing.

“We probably have more complex systems used in practice than we let on,” Baron told the Farming Smarter conference held in Leth-bridge in December.

Weather and snow cover dictate the success of swath and bale grazing, so a combination of options limits risk.

The 2014 western Canadian cow-calf survey revealed a wide range of winter feeding methods, including traditional feeding of stockpiled forage, swath grazing, bale grazing, standing corn grazing and use of bale processors and bale feeders.

Producers have to provide feed for an average of 125 days during winter, which means the cost subtracts directly from the bottom line.

Baron said 65 to 70 percent of calf production costs are incurred from feed, pasture and bedding, and the most intensive part of that is feeding cows over winter.

“If we can take some or all of those costs away during that winter feeding period, you would substantially reduce the cost of daily feed production, things like the break-even cost of selling calves in the fall,” he said.

Baron and others at the federal research centre in Lacombe, Alta., have been examining the merits of swath grazing since the early 1990s.

Early in that process, “we would have been happy if we could get the cows through the winter, having calves, good conception rates and show that it was economically feasible, but now we’ve moved beyond that,” he said.

Researchers have compared stockpiled perennial forages with swath grazed barley, oats, triticale and corn.

Some are markedly cheaper, but Baron extended a caution.

“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 cost of the feed,” he said.

The choice of crop for swath grazing is obviously key to the economics.

Corn costs twice as much as barley to grow, but it can furnish much more feed in a year with high heat units, which makes its carrying capacity high enough to bring its cost even with small grains.

In a cool year, however, corn may yield only as much feed as smaller grains.

“There’s a relationship between yield and carrying capacity if we assume that the utilization of the crop is going to be constant or somewhere around 80 percent,” Baron said.

Trials in Lacombe have also shown triticale is a viable option for swath grazing. It costs more than barley to grow but can yield double the dry matter, so half as much could carry the herd for just as long as barley.

Baron said varieties of triticale with reduced awns have addressed concerns about cows' preference for eating the crop.

"We don't know necessarily that the awn was the difference between them, but we just haven't had any problem grazing triticale."

Cows' energy use also varies with feeding type and of course weather, so feeding systems must take that into account, added Baron.

"Any swath grazed crop, we know that it takes more energy per day for a cow to survive and maintain her weight when she's out there foraging in snow and a swath compared to standing at a feed bunk," he said.

Baron suggested that producers consider providing their stockpiled grass to cows early in the winter so they can gain weight before tackling feed in swaths.

He said the quality of stored forage deteriorates most rapidly after cutting and before snowfall, so the idea has merit in terms of providing maximum feed value for the expense already incurred.

Researchers have found that staggered planting dates of crops intended for swath grazing allow for higher feed quality later.

Baron said planting could potentially be delayed until June 30 so that the crop could be swathed in September. Triticale and oats are less sensitive to delayed planting than other crops, he added.

"Be aware that forage yield may decrease as planting date is delayed."

Limiting cattle access to swaths through the use of portable electric fencing reduces labour and fuel costs associated with winter feeding.

"Extended grazing reduces yardage costs," he said. "Just about anybody can reduce their costs if they can make their cows graze successfully outside in the winter rather than feeding them at a feed bunk."

An Agriculture Canada video featuring Baron on swath grazing can be found at <http://bit.ly/1l1jpPn>