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## Ranch pencils out profit with bale, swath grazing

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Producer urges those planning to winter graze to have their feed tested and provide windbreaks for cattle

MEDICINE HAT, Alta. — Steve Kenyon uses a lot of multi-purpose farm equipment, and he doesn't own any of it.

As well, the no-till drill, the fertilizer spreader, the combine and the heavy harrows all look remarkably alike.

They are all cows.

The owner of Greener Pastures Ranching Ltd. near Westlock, Alta., has been ranching for 18 years and has never owned a tractor. Nor has he owned any cattle for the last several years, although he manages 1,500 head on 3,500 acres of leased land.

He has fed cattle for 56 cents per cow per day at best and \$1.24 per head per day at worst by custom grazing on his own land and that of other pasture owners and farmers.

Kenyon told farmers at the Dec. 2-3 Farming Smarter conference that he worries less about production practices than he does about bottom line economics.

He doesn't fertilize his grazing land, preferring the cows to do it for him, and he doesn't make hay in summer because he is too busy managing their grazing.

He also uses swath and bale grazing to manage cattle through much of winter.

"Every breath you take is 70 percent nitrogen," he said.

"Why would you ever buy any?"

Kenyon said he hauled manure once, in 1997, and hasn't done it since because the cattle handle the job. He also uses cattle to manage problem weeds in summer, eliminating the need for herbicides.

“A cow is 80 percent inefficient,” he said. “Why would nature make such an inefficient animal? Because it's not for the benefit of the cow. She's a tool in the system. We need to be able to recycle the nutrients into the ground.”

Kenyon, who is an instructor in sustainable grazing management, said no ruminants live in the rainforest because insects and bacteria decompose plant material.

In contrast, regions with a dormant season, also known as winter, all have native ruminants.

“Every grain farm should have cattle on the farm because you are recycling the nutrients,” he said.

“The cow is only a tool in that.”

Kenyon said pasture plants in a successful winter grazing program should be growing actively when frost hits because it preserves feed quantity and quality.

He has grazed cattle in February in his region, although that is not always possible, depending on snow cover and other weather conditions.

“If you can't reach through the snow and get a handful of grass, (the cattle) are going to have trouble getting a mouthful.”

Kenyon said there are three types of cattle in swath grazing systems: diggers, which get at the swaths through snow; the clean-up crew, which straggles behind the others to eat; and the opportunists, which stand beside the diggers and grab feed from their mouths.

“(However), I've had more trouble swath grazing because of no snow than I have from too much snow,” he said.

Snow that melts, soaks into swaths and then freezes causes big trouble because cattle are suddenly out of food and water.

“All my wrecks with swath grazing have happened in February or March.”

He has also used bunch grazing on land where farmers have made chaff piles. He called this method “a no brainer” for mixed grain and cattle producers because it is easy, user friendly and distributes manure well over a field.

Bale grazing remains his favoured method.

“Bale grazing is sexy. People love it. I’ve never had a wreck bale grazing.”

He makes deals with farmers to haul bales to a designated site and place them in rows 25 feet apart. Cattle are then allowed access to a few bales at a time through use of portable fencing.

“The key to bale grazing is to keep your costs low. You need to only touch the bales once at most,” he said.

“Plunk them right where you need them to be.”

Kenyon encouraged those who plan to winter graze to get their feed tested to ensure adequate nutrition. Windbreaks in the pasture are also essential, whether in the form of trees or fences.

Fields used for bale grazing in winter show better water retention capacity during the growing season after only one year, he said. The land benefits in subsequent years from residual manure and hay decomposition.

Kenyon estimates that he obtains 30 cents per cow per day in soil fertility from manure. Two hundred cows grazing for 120 days produce \$7,200 worth of fertilizer, plus the value of the organic matter.

“Over five years, it’s \$36,000 of fertilizer value,” he said.