



# Make the Most of Your Pasture

by Curt Olson

The lion's share of the corn crop goes to those who feed livestock and poultry. But cattlemen are well aware of how ethanol has impacted the demand equation. Adding weight to cattle without using corn has new importance. Jim Robb of the Livestock Marketing Information Center says it's time to let a "good old ruminant be a ruminant."

Corn prices have forced feedlots to adjust the values of the animals they buy, says Greg Lardy, beef cattle specialist in the North Dakota State University Animal and Range Sciences Department. When corn was \$2 a bushel, it made sense to buy lightweight calves and feed them to finish.

"Right now that's not really the case," he says, "and it's going to be a challenge until these price relationships return to some sense of normalcy. When this first occurred, a lot of people thought this was a short-term kind of thing. I believe it's a long term, fundamental change in corn demand because of this ethanol push. The changes we're going to make are going to be long term."

Lardy recommends that anything a producer can do to enhance the productivity or quality of the forages they have should be looked at now. Whether that is through better or different management, rotational grazing or planting new grasses, improving forage production and better quality forages probably will pay dividends in this environment, he says.

"When you look at putting weight on calves outside the feedlot — annual forages, wheat pasture graze out — the challenge we look at now is with all these commodity prices up, the value of the land for grain production and the expense of doing some of these options isn't as affordable now," he says.

Land prices are up, also. Acreage that might have been used for grazing in the past is being eyed for crop production.

## Pasture Improvements

"I think there are still options," he says. Lardy suggests that producers might want to look at annual forages such as sudan grass, oats, barley or millet that could be grazed or put up for hay.

If producers are using improved pastures as opposed to native range, consider planting fescue, brome, orchard

grass or annuals. Be sure to consult technical experts in your region of the country to determine which perennial forages are best suited for your environment

For established pastures, do a soil test first to determine if or how much fertilizer you need because the price of nitrogen and phosphorous is so high. If you're going to fertilize, don't neglect weed control.

Over the longer term in an improved pasture, consider planting complementary forages such as legumes. Alfalfa will return nitrogen to the soil that can be used by grasses planted with them. In the Southeast, producers may consider options such as fescue and red clover. In the Dakotas, Lardy says brome/alfalfa mixes work.

For annuals, field peas, cowpea, or hairy vetch are good legumes that can be planted with cool season annuals such as oats, barley, or triticale.

"Typically, the other thing we always talk about is feed alternatives, he says. "Unfortunately, right now a lot of those byproducts are priced right off corn. There's not a lot of low-cost alternatives out there."

If a producer finds an alternative feed source he wants to use, he should talk to a nutritionist or someone with technical expertise before doing so, Lardy cautions. Byproducts and alternative feeds aren't complete feeds and require supplements for a balanced feed ration.

## Marketing Options

Cattlemen can also re-evaluate their marketing options. While financial incentive to hold calves to yearling weights may develop, Lardy cautions that not every production system is set up for that. Holding them over the winter to add 200 to 300 pounds means finding an efficient, cost-effective feed source.

The other thing to consider is the genetics of your herd and their production potential. "Not every production system from a genotype standpoint is set up for the calves to go into a yearling production system," he says.

Some genotypes are best suited for feedlot entry immediately after weaning and may not work as well in a yearling system. Adding extra frame in a backgrounding or yearling system may result in an animal with a carcass that is too heavy for industry standards as a fed animal.

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