

One way to increase profitability of your cattle operation is to lower cow cost by extending the length of your grazing season. This management approach is initially a bit more time consuming, but the pay off in the end may prove to be well worth it. In order to properly achieve the goal of extending the grazing season, long term planning should take place. The main way to extend the grazing season is to begin feeding hay later in the year, and stop feeding hay earlier each year. This week we will discuss a few ways to decrease the amount of hay bales fed each year, and increase the number of days that your herd spends grazing- both of which have the potential to decrease cow cost if done correctly.

It is important to keep track of the length of grazing season, and the number of bales of hay fed per cow per year in order to determine if your feeding/grazing season is efficient. To do this, count the number of bales on hand before the hay feeding season begins, and subtract from that the number of bales on hand when hay feeding season ends. This number, the amount of hay fed throughout the duration of feeding season, should be divided by the number of adult cattle in your herd. This equation will give you the number of hay bales fed per cow per year. A producer should aim to lower the number of hay bales fed per cow each year in order to further extend the grazing season of their herd.

Two direct methods to extend the grazing season are to plant a winter forage crop, and save standing grass for winter grazing. The most recommended winter forages to plant are clover and ryegrass. These two forages have higher protein content and are more digestible than grasses, which increases performance of the animal. Clover is a very beneficial winter forage to plant because it puts Nitrogen back in the soil as it grows, which may reduce fertilizer costs. Clover performs best when planted in October, but a soil test should be done now to ensure soil pH is adequate for clover growth. Lime should be applied in the spring if pH is found to be less than 6.

Saving standing forage for winter grazing is also an option that may prove to be helpful in extending the grazing season. Standing forage should be grass that has been grazed off during the summer and early fall, but is coming back in late September. This "new-growth" standing forage is most beneficial to the cows compared to forage that has been off-limits all summer and has not been grazed off at all.

Remember- it is difficult to manage that which is not measured. Reducing the number of hay bales fed per cow, and extending the grazing season will decrease cow costs if done correctly, helping you get one step closer to having a profitable operation. To have soil tests done on your pastures, or for more information about applying lime, please contact us.

Stay tuned for a future email in which we will discuss the various types of clover and the benefits they provide.