GrazingWorks

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Grass roots

One of the most intriguing aspects of intensive pasture management is — should I say it? — its grass-roots energy. There are leaders in the grazing world — who hasn't heard of Allan Nation, publisher of the Stockman Grass Farmer? And, of course, it was French researcher Andre Voisin who first brought the concept to the public.

BY SUSAN HARLOW

But it's farmers who are developing the science and philosophy of managing pastures through livestock grazing. They tinker, try this suggestion, disprove that theory. Ideas are put to the test where they count — on farms.

These farmers aren't reticent about sharing what they learn either. They talk it over on pasture walks, through programs such as UVM's Pasture Management Outreach Program, and over the Internet.

It's that kind of ferment that makes the grazing movement exciting . . . and makes it hard to stay on top of new developments. You can talk about a new idea or product and, guaranteed, someone will have already one-upped that.

Controversy keeps life from getting dull. There's always a grazier to argue either side: Do animals on pasture require shade? Should you graze alfalfa?

That's why we hope to make this column a place to air those ideas and controversies. If you've found something that really works on your grazing operation — or something that's supposed to work and doesn't — let us know. Want to take issue with the conventional wisdom? Feel free.

Winter pastures

In the graziers' spirit of reducing costs and improving pastures, some Northeast farmers are considering wintering cattle outside.

Ben Bartlett, livestock specialist at Michigan State University, spoke about "no-barn wintering" at a grazing conference in Vermont. Some of his points:

- The main goal of no-barn wintering is to reduce your investment in expensive facilities. Take a look at how little you can get away with for barns, Bartlett said. But weigh in the advantages a barn may provide.
- Determine options for feeding animals outside. Bringing animals to the feed, enclosing round bales with portable fencing or rotating them through stockpiled forage may work. But you should have an alternate system if needed.
- Wind chill can drain animal health and performance. Bartlett recommended a grove of evergreen trees as the best windbreak. Fence cattle next to, not in, the trees so they don't damage them.

If you build a windbreak, make sure it's at least 6 feet tall and sturdy. Don't rely on the back of a building.

- Cattle won't move to food and water, or lay down to rest, if it's too muddy. Move cattle into unused lots to avoid mud, or bring in straw or hay.
- Cold weather won't be a problem if animals are in good condition and have a thick coat of hair.
- The time to prepare for outside wintering is in the spring. Remove manure from and seed down winter lots.

Mark and Sarah Russell of Sudbury, Vt., found that keeping cows on a remote pasture instead of in the barn improves cow health, saves on the electric bill and solves the problem of manure handling. They feed their dry cows on stockpiled second cut and, later, on round bales and 6 lbs. of grain a day. They increase the grain to 8 lbs. daily in the month before freshening.

Winter pasturing can also help improve pasture fertility. After beef producer Marjorie Major of Charlotte, Vt., harvests hay in wrapped round bales, she disperses them around her pastures. Once feeding starts in the fall, she moves her portable fencing to enclose a few bales placed in feeder rings. The animals are moved into the small paddock until they finish the hay; then they're moved on to the next bale.

By calving time, the cows have been moved to bales closest to the barn. Meantime, their manure is spread around the pastures. Major drags the feeding spots come spring to spread it a bit more and throws in some seed.

If you winter animals outside, you're probably already considering stockpiling forages. But studies show — makes sense — that wintering costs can be cut significantly by letting animals graze standing forage.

Canadian farmers who winter-feed cattle on fields of barley and oats that were swathed in the fall and subdivided into smaller areas for rotational grazing, reduced winter feeding costs by 50 to 70 percent from conventional wintering.

Lambing on pasture

On a pasture walk at Tom Cope's sheep and beef farm in Woodsville, N.H., in mid-September, Cope talked about lambing on pasture, called drift lambing. During the two-week lambing season in May, he moved his flock daily to new pasture, leaving behind the newly lambed ewes and their lambs. In small groups, the new lambs were easier to tag and dock, and bonded better with their moms.

Lambing on pasture is seldom done in the Northeast. But it sure cuts down on labor. And Cope was able to handle more ewes than he could have in his too-small barn. He lambed about half his 250 ewes on pasture this year, and plans to lamb them all that way next year.

Disadvantages: Cope lost some triplets and quads because of the cold when he couldn't thaw them fast enough.

Cope, who left dairy farming to raise sheep in the late 1980s, got plenty of smiles when he said, "We got smarter — we graze our best land."

Cope is one of five sheep farmers taking part in a three-year study to see if lambs raised on pasture can be produced profitably.

If you have any questions, contact Chet Parsons, UVM non-dairy livestock specialist, at 802/524-6501.

Susan Harlow of Hinesburg, Vt., is a regular contributor to American Agriculturist.