Backgrounding on Grass - Why Consider?

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Production costs for a beef cow have increased dramatically in the last several years. CattleFax recently estimated that production costs have seen a 25% increase (56% from cow/calf through the feedlot phase) since 2005. This reported increase amounts to $32/cwt on a live weight, $50/cwt on a carcass weight, and $0.72/pound on a retail basis. However, current retail prices have only increased approximately $0.29/pound.

Producers have to pay attention to production costs and find ways to cut costs considering: feed efficiency of the cow, extending the grazing season, marketing, and risk management. The latter three are very important to consider when selling calves with today's rise in prices. This article will focus on backgrounding calves on grass as an alternative to reduce cost and bring more value to the cow and calf.

For years, cow/calf producers have had the option of selling calves at weaning or backgrounding for a pre-determined period of time. This decision has almost always been market driven. However, current market prices are forcing producers to look at putting more weight on their calves before marketing. Historically, the price/lb of a 5-weight (500 lb) calf would be higher than an 8-weight (800 lb) calf. That is not the case with today's high feed prices. Due to the cost of feed which has increased dramatically, feedlots are pushing for fewer days on feed so heavier calves are demanding more money. This price swing should encourage producers to find ways to put more pounds on their calves after weaning/before marketing.

The decision to background and put more weight on calves should be determined by feed availability, whether owned or purchased. High corn and fuel prices have reduced the amount of miles a producer can afford when purchasing delivered feed. If a producer is able to put up cheap feed/hay, then it is a no-brainer. The alternative is backgrounding calves on grass which can offer the cheapest nutrient resource for putting on pounds.

There are two common grazing systems that allow producers to graze well into the fall. Each one has its advantages and disadvantages, but the biggest advantage is the reduction in cost for processing and feeding hay (up to 75%). Stockpile grazing is growing forages until maturity or first hard freeze and grazing at a later date. Swath grazing is the process of growing forages until maturity or first hard freeze, cutting forages and leaving it in windrows, and grazing these windrows at a later date. Both systems have the opportunity to extend the fall grazing season for cows, heifers, and weaned calves.

Planning ahead is crucial for backgrounding on grass as this will require knowing the timing of weaning, pasture availability and what forages are growing, how long forages are expected to last, quality of forages, what fall grazing system is being used, and estimated market date. Knowing the answer to these questions will help prepare for effectively and efficiently putting on weight at a low cost of gain.

Knowing the time of weaning will determine if a producer can begin grazing stockpiled forages or if supplemental feed will have to be provided until fall pastures are ready to graze. For producers who wean early, pastures may not have enough forage stockpiled in late summer, so supplementing feed or utilizing additional pasture for grazing will be necessary. Fall grazing can occur at any time, but delaying until after first frost will ensure optimal yields. Regardless, how pastures are managed and when stockpiling for fall grazing is initiated determines how long calves can graze in the fall.

If pastures are not set aside for fall grazing, decisions need to be made to either delegate pastures for stockpiling or provide supplemental feed throughout the backgrounding period. Pastures need to be seeded or stockpiled in early August. There are two forage types to consider that require different management practices, cool-season perennials and cool-season annuals. Perennials are easier to plan for because most pastures consist of this forage type. However, grazing management is different. If pastures are grazed too short in the fall, subsequent re-growth the following spring will be delayed, producing less yield with risk of increased competition from weeds. With annuals, there is no re-growth the following spring (if headed out in the fall), so managing for residual stubble height is of no concern. Annuals can be planted in early spring or August.

Knowing forage yield/ac and how long the forages are expected to last allows the estimate of 1) the number of grazing days for a set number of calves, or 2) the number of calves to graze for a certain number of days. This should be done when pastures have stopped actively growing, or within a week of grazing. There are several methods of estimating forage yield, but regardless of method used, multiple samples should be taken within the pasture, averaging all samples to arrive at an estimated yield. This will provide a good representation of what the pasture is producing.

Nutrients provided by forages, such as CP and TDN, must meet the nutrient requirements of a growing calf. Calves entering a backgrounding program should be consuming diets of 13–15% CP and 50–60% TDN. Typically, most cool-season grasses in the upper Midwest can meet those demands, but as forages mature, quality begins to decline, particularly energy. In 2002, Nebraska studies showed that 5-weight (500 lb) calves grazing swathed forages beginning mid-November for > 60 days gained 0.87 lbs/hd/day vs. calves fed hay which gained 0.69 lbs/hd/day. These calves were grazing subirrigated sandhills and cool-season meadows and were rotated every 14 days. Even with adequate quality forages, weight gains were achieved; however, with the upper Midwest soil type and the nutrient concentrations in forages, greater daily gains can be achieved. As a reminder, pastures used for stockpiled grazing should always be monitored for quality, particularly cool or warm-season natives. If CP or TDN is deficient, supplementation may be needed.

When stockpile grazing, one of the disadvantages is forage quality and utilization, particularly with snow depths of ≥ 4 inches. It is important to know if the forage to be grazed can complement the grazing system for optimal utilization. With swath grazing, quality and snow depth is less of a factor. With snow depths of > 4 inches, windrows provide forage in a concentrated area, increasing utilization rates. With any grazing system, in order to optimize utilization, rotational grazing must be utilized. This can be done using electrified fencing and rotating calves in any given area every 3-5 days. The shorter the grazing period within an area, the better the utilization will be. Studies in Grand Rapids, MN, have reported pregnant dry beef cows gaining 2.0 lbs/hd/day grazing windrows for 30 days in November 2006, and 0.39 lbs/hd/day grazing windrows vs -0.4 lbs/hd/day grazing stockpiled forage for 45 days in November 2007. Average daily gains were lower in 2007 due to a large snow storm that dropped 18 in. of snow 23 days after cows were turned out on pasture. Snow depth will have differential effects on utilization rate and performance depending on the grazing system used.

Estimating the market date for calves will give producers an idea of how much weight the calves will need to gain, provided the weaning weights of the calves are known. The cost of production can be projected based on how long pastures will last and how much supplemental feed will be purchased to reach the target selling weight. This will force producers to pay close attention to market prices to contract the best time of year and the best price for their calves.

Another strategy to consider is moving calves at a fast pace, knowing there will be forage left, and run the pregnant dry cows to clean up the remaining forage. This allows calves to pick through and consume the higher quality forages while cows will consume the lesser quality forage that remains. The Nebraska study showed that calves grazing swathed forages alone wasted ~30% of the total estimated forage production. To improve utilization, pregnant dry cows were turned out on the swathed pastures behind the calves, reducing forage loss to only 11.5%. This balance in forage quality consumption matches nutrient requirements of each animal class. So utilizing fall grazing in a backgrounding program for calves can reduce the cost/lb of putting weight on the calf; but good planning and monitoring are key steps to getting the desired results. For information on cow/calf management, visit the U of M Beef Team website at: www.extension.umn.edu/beef/.