

Walking boots handy for pasture conversion

by Hugh Maynard

Warning: if you don't like walking, raising beef on pasture is not for you.

If, on the other hand, you want to lower costs of production while achieving impressive beef weight gains and carcass quality, intensive pasture management may be to your liking . . . as long as you're prepared to walk the fence lines.

This sums up the tour of four farms practising intensive pasture management in the Gatineau area, held at the end of August and organized jointly by the Gatineau QFA/UPA and the regional office of MAPAQ.

Enthusiasts see pasture as a forgotten resource which, if given the same management attention as other crops, can be just as productive yet at a much lower cost. Devoting some time and thought to pasture management are essential to making it work.

Hubert McClelland, a MAPAQ agronome in Buckingham who works with a group of dairy farmers using intensive pastures, said in his presentation that there are many misconceptions about pasture use that are impediments to successful implementation.

"Some people have the idea that some fields can never be pastured. We must get outside of this box and be more flexible," McClelland noted.

He noted that many farmers think that the first thing that must be done to establish a good pasture is to re-seed the field. But, at \$100 per acre, he says that just isn't feasible.

"We can't allow that level of cost for beef. You have to rejuvenate pastures with management, lime and time," McClelland said.

That's the strategy followed by Gib Drury on his Alcove farm where he feeds 150 beef cows and 200 stockers. All the hay and cereals comes from rented land in the area, leaving the home fields to be used completely for pasture.

Over a fifteen year period the fields, many of which are steeply sloped with a thin topsoil layer on a gravel base, have been improved to the point where they provide sufficient feed for 2.5lbs of ADG. The only inputs have been composted manure from livestock and 2lbs of clover seed per acre frost seeded in early May of each year.

McClelland calculates that with the forage imported from other farms there has been a net inflow of N, P, K onto the Drury farm, an estimated investment worth \$55,000 if it had been done through purchased inputs.

Drury divides the pastures into paddocks using 19 gauge steel wire, which he says is half the cost of polywire. He adds that it only takes 2 persons a morning to set up the paddock wires and he uses old wheel rims to roll it up before wintertime.

He walks the pastures regularly to judge when to move cattle to the next pasture, normally 2-3 days, completing a full rotation in a month. Walking is also his main form of weed control using a \$10 "Weed Wacker" purchased from Canadian Tire; three wacks will take out even the largest thistle or burdock.

Drury uses no herbicides and tries to limit the amount of trimming with a tractor that he has to do of the pasture to keep it in shape.

"If I have to trim with the tractor then I haven't done a very good job with the rotation," he says.

Ten thousand pounds of gain from 32 acres of pasture is Myles McMillan's selling point for intensive pasture management. Along with his wife Cindy Duncan, they raise the calves from 35 Simmental crosses to slaughter weight in 18 months at their Farrellton farm.

Free choice round-baled hay and 3lbs of rolled barley daily through the winter produce A-1 carcasses for the local freezer trade. The grain also helps eliminate yellow fat, a common complaint with finished beef from pasture. The only other addition is the use of mineral blocks to balance the ration and help prevent coccidiosis.

Time has been most of the essence for the development of McMillan's pasture. Phosphorus is spread on the fields to counter a regional deficiency in the soil, as well as 2 lbs of white clover per acre frost seeded in the spring, which he considers to be cheaper than spreading nitrogen fertilizer.

"The clover is very good value for money. It's a slow process and may take three to five years to get full value," he says, but cost effective in the long-term.

McMillan walks the pasture twice weekly to assess whether or not to move the cattle to the next paddock. He uses a 1-10 rating system developed in New Zealand for evaluating the state of the pastures.

"You can plot over the season to gauge when you're falling behind or moving ahead. It's a very useful management tool," McMillan says.

McMillan's goal is to obtain 800 lbs of gain from pasture and 400 lbs from winter feeding, counting on the two seasons of pasture for maximum gain at minimum cost.

Regional MAPAQ evaluations show that the best rate of return goes to the cow-calf operators who keep their calves as stockers and then finish the animals the following year. Guy Lapointe, one of the department's regional beef specialists, said in his presentation that small calves may bring a higher price per pound, but heavier calves bring in more income per cow.

"A calf will gain 100lbs a month on pasture, even in the fall, and that is free gain," Lapointe said.

Cindy Duncan commented that they had struggled with the farm since buying it in 1983 with Myles commuting to Ottawa to work. Their fear was that 35 cows would not be able to provide sufficient income without off-farm work. Since deciding, in 1993, to go full-time and focus on the farm's management in order to improve productivity and income, she says things have been going better than anticipated.

"I don't know why we didn't do it before."

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