

## **More to rotational grazing than setting up paddocks**

by Susanne J. Brown

What do walking, thinking and golfing have in common?

Rotational grazing, as far as Alan Henning, a Wisconsin-based grazing consultant is concerned.

"If you want to go somewhere you need a map." he told producers attending an Ecological Farming Day held at Kemptville College in eastern Ontario this past winter.

So, if producers expect to successfully manage grass to make a rotational grazing system work, they must do a "basic walk around the farm" to map how many acres are available and what the condition the grass is in each paddock, he said.

It's amazing how few farmers have ever walked around their entire farm perimeter, Henning remarked.

"Our minds are very short," he said. So, take a notebook along on the planning jaunt and write down all observations, including the weather and the date.

Similar to condition scoring cattle, "score each paddock," said Henning.

Mark number one in your notes if the cattle grazed a particular paddock like sheep, and ten if it is overgrown and is the height of elephant grass, he recommended. But make a point of keeping the system "simple and consistent."

Along with the notebook, take a golf club and ball on your walk around the farm, said Henning.

As you enter each new paddock tee-off and if you can't find the ball it should have been grazed two days ago, he said, in reference to learning how to predict grass conditions in the paddocks.

As for thinking, it is no longer good enough to just put up a fence, open the gate and put cattle out on pasture.

Think

To make a rotational grazing system profitable, Henning said, producers must be thinking "how many acres feed how many head? And how many does it not feed?"

There is no right or wrong way on how to rotational graze, Henning said, but "in this business you can't stop thinking."

Farmers need to be thinking in terms of net return per acre rather than simply production per cow, he said.

Other practical grass goals Henning offered producers were:

- Walk the grazing area every 10 days; through every paddock and into the next.
- Think of how not to spend money, not what to spend it on. Start with no cost goals, then low cost, then actual cost.
- Take time to communicate: "Talk, then action."
- At all times, after grazing leave the plant in a growing state.
- Stop serving animals "breakfast in bed." Let the cows do the work.
- Think outside of the box. "Plan, plan, plan and then plan on being ready to change."
- In order to keep grass under control "leapfrog" paddocks to avoid surplus production.
- In the fall, allow the grass to grow longer in the paddocks. This will help hold stock up better in the wetter season than shorter grazed grass.
- The water source should be close to the feed source. "They will hardly touch the water if the feed quality is high, but when the water is far away and #22 has a need, the rest (of the herd) will follow to find out where she is going."
- "Bin run oats;" a mixture of every seed imaginable is a good recipe to use when reseeding paddocks. "More variety is the best insurance policy."
- And if unsure of what to do, simply invite neighbors over for a different perspective and alternative solutions.

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