



Out on Bale

by Kirk Gadzia

TECHNIQUE

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Winter feed costs are consistently one of the highest expenditures in most beef cattle operations. Remember, these expenses include not only the cost of putting up the feed, but moving it, storing it, and feeding it. Each one can be a separate time-consuming operation, and each has potential to take away from the bottom line. Many people not-so-fondly recall that childhood summers on the farm were spent putting up hay and moving it, and winters were spent feeding it.

Usually, the farther north you are, the more you spend on winter feeding because of the longer winter and heavier snow cover. Often, the feeding comes with additional costs of manure removal and spreading. Each day that an animal can graze its daily requirement, without being fed, is a significant cost savings.

However, many agricultural operations have discovered some very innovative ways of reducing this winter feed cost while saving time and energy, and improving their land at the same time. The practices go under several names: bale grazing, swath grazing, or pile grazing. The basic idea is that the animal can feed itself, and the job of the manager is to plan the best way for that to happen on the farm.

Bale grazing usually refers to placing large round bales strategically on fields where they are to be grazed during the winter months. Typically, groups of bales are fenced with a one-wire electric fence to provide enough forage for 2 days to 2 weeks for the herd size that is being grazed. Feed calculations are based

on about 3% of the body weight of the mature animal per day: Thus, a 1,000-pound cow typically would be allotted 30 lbs of dry matter per day.

Swath grazing is the practice of grazing windrows of cut perennial forage, annual grain or forage crops, or crop aftermath (stubble). Usually, the field where these windrows are located is cross-fenced with a tem-

With bale grazing, increases of 400 to 4,000 lbs/a/yr of forage are often reported.

porary one-wire electric fence. This is also known as strip grazing, and placement of the strips and their sizes are related to the nutritional needs of the animal, the weather, and the parts of the field that may need to be utilized at different times (e.g., lower areas that collect deep snow, or that are far from cover in bad weather). The advantage of swath grazing is that there's no baling of the windrows and the nutri-

ents are returned directly to the site where the crop was cut.

Pile grazing is a simple variation on swath grazing, but is usually done with perennial grass stands. Here, the swaths are gathered up into loose piles rather than left in windrows. George Whitten and Mike McNeil utilize pile grazing on native meadows in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado. The bottom of the valley is nearly 8,000 feet in elevation and winters are long and very cold, with temperatures below zero (F) for weeks at a time. The main reason for piles versus windrows is the reduced exposure of forage to weather.

Lower Costs, Better Pastures

Regardless of the winter grazing method used, all of the producers I've interviewed have said the primary reason they began looking at these alternatives was cost savings. The range of cost savings has varied from 75% to 10% depending on the level of management, yearly conditions, and the type of practice used. In many instances, the practice of putting up and feeding hay has been



Piles of bunch-raked hay on Whitten & McNeil's meadows in the San Luis Valley of Colorado. These will be strip grazed during winter while under snow cover.

Photo by Cathy McNeil.