

# Rotational Grazing

## Cattle Thrive On Managed Grazing System, Grade Choice, Prime

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MidAmerica Farmer Grower

**AQUILLA, MO.**

Rotational grazing is the way to go, according to David Seyer of Aquilla, Mo., who recently upgraded his 820 acres to support the managed grazing system.

"My dad bought this farm back in 1995 and it was grown up in saplings and briars and it was a mess. The fences were in bad shape and we cleaned it all up, did a lot of bulldozing and bush hogging and underneath most of the briars we found good fescue grass."

The next effort was to rebuild all the exterior fences. There were no barns here, so they built the barns, built the corrals. There was a road through the farm, but other than that, they started from scratch. The farm had several ponds on it, many of which were ruined from the cattle around them.

"We bulldozed them in," Seyer continued. "We cleaned up a couple of ponds and fenced them off, and now we have freeze proof waterers in the dams. But, we did all the electric fencing ourselves, I didn't hire anybody to do it. I got a post driver and tractor and drove them in the ground. When dad put in the well it served only one waterer. Now we have one well serving over 20 waterers."

We put in roughly 16,500 feet of pipeline. We've got a well on the south end, a well on the north end and the pipeline meets approximately 150 feet from each in the middle. We have water access to every one of the 44 separate fields and I'm dividing up a few more fields now. Some of the fields are actually feedlot fields. We feed them out of the feeder, but they have grass too. We built two hay barns after buying the farm to store our winter hay that has cut our hay loss approximately 33 percent."

"Right now we have around 820 acres here that we take care of and it's all connected," he said. "About 640 acres is grazable and the rest is woods."

"When dad got this place he put in two or three cross fences on this whole farm," Seyer added. "So in a 300-acre field when you came here to check on the cattle you would see some in the woods and some here and there. Dad had too many to count and you wouldn't know if one was missing or if one was out in the woods having a calf. You didn't know what was going on. With a lot of the old timers, that's the way they would graze. You let them have the pond, you let them have the woods; but now we've got them confined to say 10, 20 or 30 acres, whatever the size is and when you go out you can see them, you know what's there. If you have a sick one, one having a calf, you know what's going on where, before we didn't. Like I said, dad's generation just let Mother Nature take care of itself."

Seyer admits to having learned a lot in the past 15 years. His grazing practices today are different than those of yesterday.

"We do rotational grazing and we manage their movement based on grass height," he explained. "We have bunk feeders on wheels called feed trains. I can hook them behind a four wheeler, and once they get used to eating out of them all you have to do is hook on to them and they're going to follow you. When we had the north end of the farm in grass, I moved them all the way from the north end to the south end. I had somebody behind me, making sure they were following. You know, you always have one slacker; but they'll follow you. Once you get used to moving them, they get in a routine and if the grass is getting a little short they'll go to bawling. They want to be moved, they'll let you know too."

His paddocks range from 10 acres to 20 acres, with one or two five-acre plots.

"If we have 100 cattle, for instance, and we're on a 20-acre field, the next field you want to move them to is only 10 acres; that's okay, we move them. When they get it eaten down a little bit, we'll move them to the next. We just move them according to the height of the grass."

In formulating the plan, Seyer met with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) officials at the farm office and got advice there on how to divide up the paddocks.

"We've revised the map several times," he said. "Of course, these dark areas are woods, but the farm office helped us divide it up; they helped us with pipelines and how to run them and we went with their advice and their thinking on it. Since then we've added more water, we've added more fields, but we had a pipeline that we could tie into to add more. Still, the farm office designed the plan."

Michelle Gross, District Conservationist, of the Stoddard County NRCS Office, commented on the grazing plan.

"David originally approached us with the idea of establishing a rotational grazing system in 2000. NRCS was able to provide both financial and technical assistance through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The original design was for a 640 acre rotation grazing system, with 18 paddocks. The design called for almost 10 miles of cross fencing and over 6,000 feet of pipeline."

David also partnered with the Missouri Department of Conservation in developing a Forest Management Plan on approximately 80 acres of forestland within the grazing system. The cattle now have limited access to the forestland. The local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) also was able to assist with some pasture revitalization projects.

"David is a good example of our NRCS programs at work," Gross continued. "He began with a concern on his grazing operation and between several different programs and partnerships we were able to address those concerns."

"He has been able to extend his grazing season, he's getting better forage utilization and he's able to provide a higher quality forage to his livestock," she added.

Since the original plan was developed, David has now divided the area into 44 separate pad-

docks and has added water access to every paddock.

The idea for rotational grazing was first explored by Seyer's father years ago.

"We like to buy our cattle around 500 pounds, but we buy them at various weights and grow them on grass and when they get fatter, we'll put them in feedlots and finish them," he said.

Along with the feeder in the field, he gives them sudan grass or grass hay. "We'll have a feeder in the field with that, then when we feed them out on grass we'll use a grower feed mix. It doesn't have much corn in it. But we try to grow them on grass until they're around 800 pounds, give or take."

All the feed is from Straightway Farm Service, he uses just two mixes, a grower and a finisher.

Basically Seyer starts them with grass and fin-



Seyer meets with Michelle Gross, (left) NRCS District Conservationist, United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service at Stoddard County, who advised him on how to divide up the paddocks.

Photo by John LaRose, Jr.

ishes them with grass and a grain mix.

"We try to finish them on grass and when the grass gets short we give them hay or some kind of mix to get them through. But naturally, when you have a feeder set up they're not going to eat as much grass. They like that feed," he said.

"The pasture cattle that are out on grass, we limit feed them. We use a tractor and a hydraulic feeder, and we feed them just once a day; and when they get in the feedlot they have access to feed all the time, night and day."

Once they're on a full finish feed, they'll gain about 100 pounds a month.

"If a calf weighs 800 pounds you put him on full feed and you want to get him up to about 1,200 pounds; it's going to take roughly 4 to 5 months to finish him," Seyer explained. "There are some cattle that will finish at 1,100 pounds, some of them make it 1,300 pounds. Different breeds of cattle are different when they're going to finish. We just pretty much look at them and we can tell if they're finished or not."

Seyer also had some parting words:

"Back in 2008, we had 145 acres of pasture that had played out so we planted a corn crop followed by soybeans and sudan grass," he said. "We're going back to grass to feed cattle on those acres. We replanted that this fall. We have a good outlook for cattle in the future, so we're going to stick with cattle and not mess with the row cropping. For us, it was a no brainer going back to cattle on those acres. We had it divided up anyway and we had the waterers."

We do some of the age and source cattle here. That's where you have to know when they were born so the United States can sell them to Japan. They have to be under 20 months of age, and you have to be verified to do this and we do some of that here.

We ear tag the calves when they're born, we write it down; and we buy some cattle from a few people who are set up to do age and source verification through this company."

Seyer says that his cow/calf herd is only about 5 percent to 10 percent of his operation now, but that is growing.

"The benefit when they're age and source verified is we can get a bit of incentive on them, a little bonus when we sell them," he said. "It's not a lot when you consider the paper work; but the bonus is \$35 per head, and it adds up. It's just something we do so the United States can sell cattle to Japan. We have to keep our markets."

One processing plant in Kansas requires they be age and source verified; from there they are exported.

Rick Grantham, owner of Straightway Farm Service, made further comments for this story:

"Before David started feeding with Straightway Farm Service, he was feeding corn and supplement to cattle running on grass," he said. "The corn was so high in starch it was killing the bugs in the rumen that digest the grass."

Seyer added that feeding Straightway's commodity ration helped the cattle utilize the grass better and gain more from the commodity feed than the corn he was feeding. "I have a scale on the farm I can weigh cattle and check their gain."

"The grass was actually slipping a lot of the corn before it could be utilized," he said. "Now I'm getting more gain from the grass by feeding as little corn as possible. The cattle are fed the last 60-90 days with approximately 50 percent corn to get them to grade. I recently had a load of cattle that graded 100 percent choice with 17 head going prime. The cattle brought \$133.47 premium per head. I think it is working."

That is a success story. Δ

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