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## Swath Grazing

Growing up “making hay” was one of my favorite summer activities, and that was when small square bales had more popularity. Growing older, I’ve begun to think about ways to cut this cost out of the livestock enterprise. Our neighbors to the north have done more work in the area of swath grazing. Rather than recreate the wheel, I’ll share excerpts on this topic from an article originally written by Adele Harty, former SDSU Extension Cow/Calf Field Specialist.

Feed makes up the largest expense on a cow/calf operation. In addition to the initial expense, producers need to consider the storage and waste associated with winter feeding. As expenses increase, and producers evaluate more-efficient management techniques to lower production costs, one alternative may be to incorporate swath, or windrow grazing. Swath grazing can be utilized with various crops and can improve utilization of the crops for feed, while decreasing fuel, harvest and feeding costs and also improving soil health.

Swath grazing is the practice of cutting hay, small grains or forage crops and leaving them in windrows for livestock to graze during the winter months. Rather than having the expense of baling the hay, moving it off the field and feeding it in the winter, the feed is left in windrows, and cattle are allowed access to a limited number of windrows at a time as a means to reduce winter feed costs and increase soil fertility.

Swath grazing has its benefits in the Midwest, where colder temperatures and snow accumulation regularly occur. If utilizing a small grain crop, such as, but not limited to, millet, sudan or sorghum, swath grazing may provide an additional opportunity to utilize the forage. A study conducted at Iowa State University evaluated forage quality and utilization of swath grazing on the cow herd. Millet and sorghum were harvested in late July as a hay crop, allowed to regrow, and the regrowth was cut and raked in late December for a swath grazing trial.

Cows in their third trimester of gestation were moved from corn stalk residue to the swaths, where they grazed in a similar method to intensive grazing. Cows were given enough swaths to graze for three days at a time, and then fencing was moved and cows were given access to the next section. The logistics of moving fencing during the winter can be a challenge, so take that into consideration, as ground temperature will affect fencing being moved during the rotation. A reliable winter water source will be vital to the success of this system and could increase labor and time requirements.

The nutrient value of the feed did decline toward the end of February when cows were switched over to a TMR; however, they saw no detrimental effects to the calves as a result. Cows were able to utilize the feed with up to 12 inches of snow accumulation and temperatures of -20 degrees Fahrenheit. Forage utilization was up to 70%, which makes swath grazing a cost-effective option in comparison to putting the forage in bales.

With swath grazing, operating equipment and overall labor decrease, as harvesting and moving bales or manure hauling are minimal. The study also found that grazing this crop residue had minimal impact and did not affect regrowth of a perennial forage crop, thus allowing grazing to occur on a hay field or permanent pasture. Swath grazing increases soil health through manure and urine distribution. In a dry year, it helps create a potential seedbed and improved filtration by breaking soil crust, fully trampling all the non-eaten materials, and spreading out dung piles, making them less fly friendly. This also provides a food source for soil microbes, thus increasing fertility of fields in the long-term.

Reference: Dahlke, G. R., (2022) [Swath Grazing Forage Sorghum and Pearl Millet Observations Regarding Quality and Utilization as Winter Feed](#), Iowa State University Animal Industry Report 18(1). Doi.