# LOW COST COW/CALF PROGRAM

***The Bulletin*** ***For Alumni Of The School***

**Volume 7** **Number 3**

## Southern Stockpile

For those living in Canada or the northern tier of US states, stockpiled forage is a way of life. If a Rancher is to survive in the cow/calf business, the growing, harvesting, storing and feeding of hay must be eliminated or at least minimized - therefore, stockpiling (*a reserve of standing forage that has grown or regrown and is held in reserve for later grazing*). The "later grazing" is the time that many would feed hay. The stockpiler is going to feed hay as well but the cow is the swather, bailer, loader, laborer, etc. The Rancher who is not haying all summer and feeding hay all winter is chastised as a lazy bum. The labels become less complimentary as the bum accumulates profits. One point that arises (in the argument over hay vs. stockpile) is sustainability. Ranchers pride themselves in the fact that they are in the grass farming business and they harvest and market solar energy that otherwise would be unavailable to humans. Admirable! The question, however, becomes - how many fossil fuel calories are required to get these solar calories to the consumer? It is easy enough to build the equation with on-farm energy expenditures only. These include fuel, housing (heating and cooling) and, in some cases, fertilizer, irrigation, etc. Also, where did the swather, bailer, tractor and pickup come from? Fossil fuel calories are required for ore recovery, smelting, milling and construction of the equipment. How about the tires and green paint? The folks that make all of this available live in houses that are lighted, heated and cooled. They drive cars. It goes on and on. Add up the caloric input and divide by the life of the equipment (20, 25, 30 years). Finally, calculate the ratio of calories contained in usable beef produced, to the fossil fuel calories used to produce those beef calories. The ratio is less than one (< 1.0), meaning more fossil fuel calories are used than beef calories produced. Sustainable? No Way! It appears that the cow/calf business cannot survive with solar calories alone. Here we come, ANWR.

## Snow and the Stockpile

Hay typically is fed when the forage is covered with snow. Stockpiled forage is grazed when there is snow cover. When wind and thaw do not expose at least a portion of the standing forage, some plowing is necessary. When the cattle cannot nose through the ice crust, plowing is called for. These inputs are not daily requirements throughout the fall and winter months but rather occasional, following a severe storm or thaw/freeze period. There are regions of North America where snow is seldom that brutal and is even nonexistent. Forage still does not grow year-round, so there does exist a need for stockpiling. Is this a common Southern practice? No! **Haying is**. Scientists from Oklahoma State U[1] make note of this in a review article. In the OSU report, it is concluded that "*stockpiling bermudagrass forage for fall and winter grazing has the potential to reduce cow-calf production costs*." From the available research information, their conclusion cannot be much more definitive than a **maybe**. The herds reviewed in the report calve in late winter. BCS must be maintained and the cows must be gaining at the time of calving in order to accomplish satisfactory rebreeding. Given this limitation, high-quality hay, regardless of cost, is the way to go. Another limitation to stockpiling is that each year, you have the choice of cutting hay or stockpiling according to the report. ***"To Hay or not to Hay – That is the Question."*** It depends upon the market value of the hay. When hay is cheap, feed hay. When hay is expensive, stockpile. This conflict arises because hay production and cow/calf production are considered a single enterprise. Beyond the University environment and into the real world, we know that this is the shortest path to bankruptcy. Hay production is an enterprise all of its own. It generates its own gross margin. It is a business that you don't whimsically turn off and on. The same can be said for stockpiling. You cannot wait for December's hay price to make a decision. Stockpiling is a part of the operation or it is not.

[1] Lalman, DL, CM Taliaferro, FM Epplin, CR Johnson and JS Wheeler. 2000. Review: Grazing stockpiled bermudagrass as an alternative to feeding harvested forage. Pro Amer Soc of Anim Sci.

## Other Bad Things

The reviewers found other problems with stockpiling the bermudagrass. With heavy rains, it does tend to lodge. Is hay fed upright or lying down? When the deep snow melts away from the Alberta and Montana meadows, is the grass standing? It was further noted that the protein and energy contained in the stockpiled forage declined during the fall and winter. Nutrient loss, particularly protein, accelerated during seasons in which there was considerable rain. Is this unique with bermudagrass in Oklahoma? I don't think so! The quality of stockpiled forage in the colder climes may be sustained better than in regions of warm winter weather. Canadian research has demonstrated that once the forage freezes and receives some snow cover, the nutrient composition is sustained. This occurs until the late winter and early spring thaws, when all is leached from the plant cells.

## Asking Too Much

It is not the intention of this column to bash the Universities. They do excellent work and perform a great service for our industry. Is there some way, however, that they can take a real-life cow/calf situation and make it work, without spending any money? Let us allow $20 per pair per year for supplemental energy. OK?

## Rumors

*Don Adams, with the U of NE at North Platte, is to be commended for his efforts and achievements in harmonizing cows and land. Thank you.*

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