



Give Hay the Boot

Rotational grazing allows North Carolina producer to graze his cattle year-round.

*Story & photos by **Becky Mills**, field editor*

One of the happiest days of Bass Hyatt's cattle career came from a divorce. Most assuredly not from Sandra, his wife and partner of 45 years, but from his hay operation.

"I don't have to start up the tractors in the winter. I don't have to make hay. I got rid of the hay equipment, and we don't have the maintenance or fuel costs to run it," Hyatt gloats.

"Our hay field was 7 miles away and with these curvy roads I almost got run over

twice," adds the Brasstown, N.C., producer.

The journey toward Hyatt's hay-free zone started in 1997 when he retired from his career at the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) office. He began clearing pastures and improving the genetics in his commercial herd.

"That's when he started looking into rotational grazing," Sandra recalls.

His "Ah ha" moment, though,

came when he attended a grazing school put on by North Carolina extension specialists Matt Poore and Jim Green.

"It made sense to me," says Hyatt. "I bought the reels and stakes and a car battery and tried rotational grazing on a 30-acre pasture."

Sandra says, "It turned out really well. It makes you pay attention."

Bass agrees. "I figured if I could do one pasture, I could do it on all of them. I put chicken litter out that fall, it rained good, the cows were fat, and I never looked back."

Now his 200 acres of fescue, dallisgrass, crabgrass, wild legumes, common Bermuda grass and native grasses are in a rotation from the first part of April through September. Then he relies on strip-grazing the stockpiled growth of those same forages until the grass starts to green up again in the spring.

The six pastures on the family farm, in continuous operation since 1866, are between 30 and 40 acres. When the grass is actively growing, Hyatt leaves the whole herd, normally around 70 cows, on a pasture for two to four weeks. Then he simply moves them to the next pasture.

"We turn them in when the grass is around 10 inches (in.) tall and move them when it is 3 to 4 inches tall," he says.

If you don't want to get that exact, Auburn University extension forage specialist Jennifer Johnson says she has a rule of thumb she shares with new graziers: "We tell them to take half and leave half."

She adds, "With proper rotation and stocking rates, animal performance and forage efficiency increase."

Give it time to grow

Since the cattle are going in on a paddock or pasture before it gets overly mature and stemmy, they are getting the tender, most nutritious part of the plant. Because they leave before they graze it to the ground, the plants can recover more quickly and regrow.

Since Hyatt's whole herd is normally in a pasture for three to four weeks, that gives the other pastures time to grow. Hyatt particularly appreciates that part of rotation since it lets him stockpile standing forage for the winter months.

He portions out the stockpiled forage with strip-grazing, or rationing the forage out with a temporary electric wire and portable fence posts. Hyatt normally gives the cows all they'll eat in a day, which usually works out to around an acre.

"I move the wire daily, before breakfast," he notes. "In a 35-acre pasture



that will last them about a month.”

They can back-graze, or go back to the forage they’ve already eaten, but Hyatt says most of his pastures have a permanent fence to cut them in half so the most they can back-graze is two weeks. “That can really retard the plant if they go back and get it the second time.”

Hyatt also uses rotational and strip-grazing as a form of weed control.

“The cattle love weeds if you get them at the right stage,” he says. “They’ll graze horse nettle and burdock if it is a strip situation. Cockleburs graze good. It astounded me.”

Sandra adds, “They even like to eat the leaves of pigweed.”

Scott Sell, director of Edisto Forage Bull Test, isn’t surprised. The bull test is housed at the Edisto Research and Education Center. At one time researchers actually planted pigweed on the Blackville, S.C., facility so they could study ways to control it. As a result, it is plentiful.

“When pigweed is small and immature it is pretty palatable,” Sell reports.

“So we use grazing as a tool to manage it. We run the bulls across it when they aren’t on test.”

Along with weeds, Hyatt lets his yearlings have access to annual forages twice per year. In addition to helping fill in the gaps of his perennials, the forages provide high-quality grazing. Hyatt uses them as a pasture-renovation tool.

In the spring, he sets aside part of a pasture that needs renovation and sprays it with Roundup®. Then he drills in Ray’s Crazy Mix, a mixture of grazing corn, cowpeas, soybeans, sorghum-sudans, pearl millet, radish, forage brassicas and sunflowers.

In the late summer he lets his calves graze it down close, then drills in Ray’s Crazy Mix of winter annuals, made up of winter peas, crimson clover, ryegrass, oats, wheat, hairy vetch, turnips and radishes. That gives his permanent pastures time to grow before he puts them back in the rotation.

When he chooses, he can then plant the pasture back to perennials like MaxQ® fescue, which doesn’t contain the endophyte that is harmful to cattle; orchard grass; and persistent bromegrass.



►Brasstown, N.C., cattleman Bass Hyatt uses both rotational and strip-grazing to save on purchased hay.

To help fuel the forage growth in his whole system, he relies on applications of layer litter, applied to approximately 40 acres per year. “The layer manure has lime in it,” he notes. “That keeps the pH up. It also has all the nutrients needed and increases the organic matter of the soil.”



►Bass Hyatt’s grazing system allows him to save purchased hay to take his yearlings to heavier weights.

Obviously, the cattle also need water no matter what pasture or strip they’re in. Three creeks and a number of small branches run through the Hyatt’s farm. Hyatt used them, with financial and technical assistance from the USDA Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS), the FSA and the North Carolina Soil and Water district, to build two pressure-fed water systems and two gravity-flow systems.

In the process, he also built miles of fence to keep the cattle out of the creeks and streams. That effort, along with his rotational-grazing system, earned he and Sandra the 2013 Environmental Stewardship Award given by Merck Animal Health, the North Carolina Cattlemen’s Association and the North Carolina Forage and Grasslands Council.

Optimizing performance

By carefully managing his rotational system Hyatt was able to go for 10 years without feeding a bale of hay to his cow herd, although he did continue to feed purchased hay to his weaned calves. In 2010 he also added 20 cows to the list for purchased hay. It was by no means as a result of a failure of his system, though.

“We are maximizing our production due to high prices,” he explains. If prices drop, he’ll simply sell the extra cattle and go back to year-round grazing with the whole herd.

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In addition, he says, carrying his weaned calves to heavier weights works well as a fescue-management tool. In the late spring when the fescue is growing rapidly, Hyatt grazes the yearlings on it to keep it from heading out. The seedheads contain a higher concentration of the toxic endophyte.

He then sells the calves as grass-fed yearlings to Hickory Nut Gap Farm in Asheville. After finishing on grass, they market the beef through stores like Whole Foods and Earth Faire.

When asked, Hyatt says he can't come up with any negatives about his rotational system. "The manure is spread out on the pastures, there is less labor, I only have to spray for thistles, and I don't have to make hay."

While climbing up and down the steep

mountainous pastures to move temporary fencing would be a chore for some, he says, "That is the high point of my day. I get my exercise, and I get to see my cows."

The grazing system also has the 77-year-old looking forward to the future, including more chances to learn.

"We depend on the Blue Ridge Cattlemen's Association, the North Carolina Cattlemen's Association, the North Carolina Forage and Grassland Council, extension conferences, field days and Dr. Poore for the latest information," he says. "We'll keep working toward better cattle, better soils and cleaner water."

Grass-friendly genetics

While Bass Hyatt gives rotational grazing a

► Sandra and Bass Hyatt earned the 2013 Environmental Stewardship Award given by Merck Animal Health, the North Carolina Cattlemen's Association and the North Carolina Forage and Grasslands Council.



► **Above:** Bass and Sandra Hyatt's cows graze year-round thanks to their rotational- and strip-grazing systems.

► **Below:** Bass Hyatt installed watering systems around his farm to keep his cattle out of the creeks.



great deal of the credit for making the most of his forages, he says the right genetics are a key piece to the system.

"We try to find bulls that are grass-friendly," he says. "We tried Balancer bulls, and those were the prettiest calves we've ever had, but the cows were too big. Our food supply is not good enough to support them. Ten cows came up open. My cows have to scrap around these pine tops. That's when we went back to straight Angus."

He says the cows that work the best on his operation are a frame score 5.

"We use a lot of Ohlde blood, as well as Wye and Pinebank," he shares. "They are smaller and grass-friendly."

This year he'll continue to refine his herd's genetics by using GeneMax® testing on his replacement heifers.

Along with the genetics, the North Carolina cattleman is grateful to the American Angus Association for the chance to learn from other cattle producers. "A few years ago, Sandra and I went on the National Angus tour in Montana. We appreciated that opportunity so much."

For more information on Ray's Crazy Mix, see King's AgriSeeds Inc., Ronks, Pa., at www.kingagriseeds.com. For more information on grazing programs, see North Carolina State University Center for Environmental Farming Systems at www.cefs.ncsu.edu/whatwedo/researchunits/amazing-grazing.html.



Editor's Note: Becky Mills is a cattlegirl and freelance writer from Cuthbert, Ga.