

# MAKING FORAGES WORK DOWN ON THE FARM

*Russell C. Hackley*

Beef Producer  
Clarkson, KY

My pastures are utilized by a beef operation consisting primarily of a small cow/calf herd (30 cows), and a stocker operation numbering from 300-350 head annually, which are grazed only, from spring until fall. These stockers are purchased, continental breed calves, weighing from 400-450 pounds. In the fall, they are sold to Laura's Lean Beef, usually at a forward contracted price after adding 300 pounds of gain. Occasionally, the stocking includes calves not eligible for Laura's Lean which are then sold in truckload lots through internet sales.

While I have been involved in farming and raising beef cattle all my life, my methods and primary enterprise have certainly changed. About 15 years ago, I began to focus more on controlled grazing and better utilization of my forages. The shift resulted in producing fatter cows without the opportunity to market this extra gain. Such opportunity cost overcame my reluctance to switch from cows to a stocker operation.

This move has been good for me because I have always enjoyed producing quality forages. Through better utilization, I am not only producing more pounds of beef per acre, I am also able to sell every pound of gain I produce with stockers.

Certainly, my operation does not reflect an attempt to maximize production, nor am I interested in pursuing maximum production at my age. However, it does compare reasonably well with other beef operations as well as grain production.

For example, my stocking rate for stockers is set to produce from 400 to 500 pounds of gain per acre, depending on quality of forages and rainfall. A pound of gain for the past 14 years has had a gross value from \$.55 per pound to my best of \$1.26 per pound on a set of calves which occurred with a roll-up in price.

What delights me about this method is that I am able to harvest these forages with "tools" (cattle) that are appreciating in value everyday (2 lbs./head/day gain) rather than depreciating everyday as with the heavy metal of tractors, hay balers, combines, etc.

It is also a pleasant bonus to see how the fertility of the soil is maintained through the recycling of nutrients by pasturing versus other methods of harvesting, thereby substantially reducing commercial fertilizer costs.

The cow herd I maintain is mostly an emotional decision. These cows are descendants of a cow herd my dad owned when he was farming and he has been gone 43 years. I also enjoy the husbanding of a cow/calf herd, and with today's prices, it's even more fun!