DO'S AND DONT'S IN ALFALFA GRAZING
My Opinion

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I usually start grazing in April when alfalfa is about 10 inches tall. I like to start with enough cattle to graze a paddock clean in two to five days, then move to another paddock, returning to re-graze in about 35 days. I usually need at least eight paddocks in the system. You must rotate cattle on Alfalfa for the stand to persist. It will take seven or eight head of 500 pound calves per acre to keep up with alfalfa growth in the spring. Part of the calves will need to be removed in June and maybe some more in mid-July. Three or four head per acre will probably be enough during the summer.

Listed below are some random comments based on experience I have gained from grazing alfalfa for the last few years.

--Bloat - I don't consider bloat to be a major problem. Anyone grazing legumes should be concerned, however, bloat has not been a problem for me. I use rumensin in a free choice mineral. Also don't turn hungry cattle onto lush alfalfa, adding grass when seeding alfalfa helps, force cattle to eat stems as well as leaves, and watch cattle on cloudy, rainy days and after a frost. When first turned on alfalfa, cattle will usually eat the grass and weeds before starting on the alfalfa. Feeding a bloat prevention product may be a good idea, however I haven't felt that it was necessary.

--I think it is very important to have cattle healthy when grazing alfalfa. Sick calves seem to have more trouble recovering while grazing alfalfa than grass. It seems cattle 400 pounds plus handle alfalfa better than very lightweight calves.

--Grazing hasn't seemed to shorten stand length, providing you rotate. I have grazed stands for five years without unexpected population decline. One to three plants per square foot are enough to achieve excellent gains.

--Gain - I feel one of Alfalfa's strong points is summer grazing, when other pastures are dormant. It's possible to get 1.5 - 2 pounds per day gain in July and August. With the right stocking rate two pounds per day plus is possible all season long, without any grain supplementation.

--Fertility - Fertilizing is less critical when grazing than when cutting for hay. I have grazed fields for three years without fertilizing, soil test levels decline, but not dramatically. Probably fertilizing at one-half your normal hay rate would be adequate, 50 pounds of P and 150 pounds of K per acre should maintain soil fertility levels.

--<u>Shade</u> - I try to provide shade during the hot months. Cattle will graze alfalfa off and on throughout the day, however, they seem to enjoy a place to cool off.

--<u>Insects</u> - Insects must be controlled in a grazing system, just like hay. Spraying for weevil is usually necessary. Leafhoppers don't seem be as serious when grazing.

--<u>Erosion</u> - It is very difficult to keep vegetation in alleys. If there is mush slope, gullies will form in the alleyways. I suggest having two or more alleys and rotate to maintain sod, also have several water sources so cattle will not have to follow the same path every time can help. Keep alleys on the contour whenever possible will help too.

--<u>Stocking Rate</u> - The more cattle you have the greater the grain per acre potential, however, the grain per animal will be less. Maximum grain per acre may not be the most profitable. Fixed costs must be covered before there is any profit. Also the more animals you have, the greater the risk, both in risk of dropping prices and death losses. Seven or eight head per acre during the spring will be needed to utilize the spring growth, while only two or three head per acre will be necessary during the summer. You may be able to add back two or three head in late August or September.

I consider grazing alfalfa to be a profitable enterprise that I am going to continue. Grazing alfalfa requires a higher level of management that traditional pastures, but the profit potential is greater. I feel this is another method of trading your management ability for dollars.