Pasture and Field Goal Kickers – No Respect

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Reprinted from Cattle Call, 2007, Vol 12, Iss 1

If football field goals were worth 6 points instead of 3, kickers would get paid a lot more and people would talk about kickers instead of quarterbacks. If corn was worth $4 per bushel, diesel was $3 per gallon, and equipment cost were sky high, people would pay a lot more attention to doing a good job with low cost pasture.

Whoa! Diesel is almost $3 per gallon and corn is over $3.50 per bushel right now! Has your low cost pasture gained any respect? Cheap corn and low cost hay had a lot of people bringing feed to the cow when the cow should be going to the feed. How can you make more pasture, reduce your costs, and let your cows do the work? Here are some principals for a crop with new "respect."

Question: The first thing to plant in your pastures is what? Answer: Fence posts! You would not turn your cows into the whole winter's bale pile at one time, why do you let your cows wander all over the farm. The cows are picking and choosing the best feed, letting the weeds grow un-challenged, and walking down the rest. There are all sorts of improved pasture grazing systems; controlled grazing, rotational grazing, planned grazing, etc., but the key point is that we give the plants some time to rest and re-grow. Even two pastures are a big improvement over one pasture and this is one case where more (pastures/paddocks) is better. Fence doesn't cost that much, doesn't burn diesel, can last over 20 years, and is the most under-used tool on most beef farms. Talk to someone -- MSUE, NRCS, etc., to get grazing and fencing information. Cost share programs are also available.

The next step is to plant…, not yet! This list is in order of the "best bang for the buck" and the next best investment is most commonly improved fertility. The place to start is with a soil test. It's amazing how many people spend thousands of dollars on fertilizer and have no idea what their pasture fertility levels are. Or, they have a single nutrient that is a weak link and holding forage growth down and they use no fertilizer. Triple 20 sounds good, but it might be a waste of some nutrients and a poor use of your dollars especially when a soil test is less than $20. How can pasture be low cost if we start spending money on fertilizer? Most of the costs of pasture are fixed costs; taxes, fence, water system, etc., and if a little fertilizer can increase yield, it dilutes the cost. For example if the overhead on one acre of pasture is $40 and the yield is one ton, then the cost is $40/ton. If you put on $20 of fertilizer you now

have $60 per acre but if the yield is two ton, then the cost is $30/ton (a ton of pasture is about 40 ~ 50 cow days of grazing and it takes three acres to get five months of grazing on many pastures). Get out and do some soil tests to see if a little fertilizer, especially P or K, is your pasture production weak link.

The next place to invest in your pasture is to get some legumes into your grass pastures with frost or over-seeding. On pastures with good fertility and hard fall grazing to weaken the existing grass, spread clover seed on spring snow cover while the ground is still freezing and thawing. Be sure to graze off that first flush of grass to give the little clover seedlings some daylight and less moisture competition. It takes about 100 pounds of nitrogen to grow one ton of forage and for yields over one ton, you either need legumes or a checkbook to purchase nitrogen fertilizer. Nitrogen fertilizer is good for about 30 days and clover is good for three years. Legumes also improve the nutritional quality of your pasture for potentially improved animal performance.

The last place to spend your hard earned dollars is to plow, till and plant a whole new pasture crop. There are times when this is the best option. If the field was a corn field or has a severe undesirable plant population (weeds) or it fits into your tillage plan anyway, then planting a new pasture may be a good option. What kind of pasture should you plant? Should ryegrass, alfalfa, or the new fescues be considered? There is not a cookbook answer to your question. The best bet is to talk to experienced people in your area or people who know your soil type and see what they recommend. Some of the new species look good but are very short lived, some take special grazing management, and some may improve your grazing program as compared to the starved- out bluegrass pastures you now have. Plowing is expensive; be sure to have a plan, control of your grazing, good fertility, and the right varieties before you turn a furrow.

Pasture can be the most profitable crop on your farm, but it will not happen by accident. Small investments in pasture management can generate big returns with fewer days spent feeding and less tons of high cost harvested feed. If $3.50 corn is the new reality, your pastures deserve new respect and a new management plan.