



## Winter Grazing – Benefits to the Land & Cattle A Producer Profile

Increasing the efficiency of each acre of land is the strategy of Grenfell area farmer, Owen Pekrul. He believes by combining a beef herd with an annual cropping system, land use efficiency can be achieved and it will result in a more profitable operation.

Owen direct seeds about 1500 acres each year. The remainder of his 5000 acres is either native pasture or seeded grass. He runs 325 cows on this land base and he finishes all the calves on the farm. His goal is to harvest each acre of land 1.5 times per year. In order to do that, he has implemented a fall and winter grazing system that enables him to utilize the crop land more than once.

“With the number of creeks and draws that intersect our land, we can’t seed annual crops corner-to-corner so that reduces the efficiency of the grain operation”, explained Owen. “But allowing the cows to run over it and utilizing the crop residues contributes to the efficiency of the operation overall”.

In order to use the land more than once, Owen had to make some changes to how he managed the beef cow herd. He began by moving calving season from March to May. “Now that the cows calve later, they are only in their second trimester during the winter months so their nutritional requirements aren’t as high than if they were in their 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester or lactating,” he said. Later calving has also enabled him to handle more cows. “I wouldn’t be able to keep an eye on that many cows if we were calving in the colder months”, said Owen.

While the cows are out on pasture, they are receiving grain supplements and silage until the grass begins to grow. The cows & calves are then moved through the pastures in rotation.

About the end of June, Owen brings the herd into the yard so that it can be processed and vaccinated. Breeding season begins in mid-July. The Simmental – Red Angus cows are



*Crop residue piles are dropped at harvest to be used for field grazing in the winter. Winter grazing cropland increases Pekrul’s operational efficiency.*

bred Red Angus while the Red Angus cows are bred Fleckvieh/Simmental. Breeding season lasts about 60 days.

The calves are weaned at between 120 and 150 days of age. Owen believes that both the cows and calves will do better with early weaning and it is much cheaper to feed them separately. “The cows will recover more quickly when the calves are weaned early and the calves will gain more efficiently with early weaning,” he explained.

Since moving the calving date to May, Owen said he is getting the same pounds of beef as he was with the earlier calving but his labour and costs are less and the efficiency of the cow herd has improved.

Once the silage fields and grain fields have been harvested, the cows are then taken off pasture and put in those fields. Owen has tried a couple of different winter feeding methods including swath grazing and the dumping of crop residue piles. He finds this to be a very economical way of wintering cows. “The cows go after the chaff and straw and

whatever grain is left in the field,” he said. “In this way the land is being used more than once.”

Owen also likes the fact that winter grazing eliminates the need to haul manure and spread it. And according to a study conducted at the Western Beef Development Centre (WBDC) near Lanigan, land that had some kind of winter grazing on it received a bonus \$2.25/cow/month worth of Nitrogen more over hauling the manure out of the corrals and then spreading it. “The cows are doing all the work and the land is benefiting from them being there,” said Owen.

There is some concern that the cows won't properly clean up the swaths or piles and that will result in seeding problems the following spring. Owen indicated that he hasn't had that experience. “I push my cows. They have to clean up the swaths or piles before I let them into a new paddock. And if I think there is a little too much residue left in an area, I can always harrow.”

Owen also supplies the cows with a little grain and silage each day. This has a couple of benefits. Firstly, it encourages them to eat up the crop residue as they forage through the piles or swaths for the extra feed. Secondly, it's a high quality product that ensures they are getting adequate nutrition and sufficient energy. Owen said, “I believe that the product going out to the cows has to be of highest quality but a minimum amount. I could achieve the same result if I supplemented with silage only but the entire day would be spent hauling it to the field”.

Even with the feed supplement, Owen is able to keep his feeding costs low. “From December until mid February, my feeding costs are less than 60¢ per cow per day.” Those numbers are based on \$35/ ton silage; \$2 /bu grain & mineral; \$16/ ton to deliver product to the field. Once the cows move into their final trimester, his costs increase somewhat to 80¢ per cow per day. He doesn't begrudge the extra cost as he knows that he has to feed the cows well enough in that last trimester to ensure they will produce a healthy, live calf.



*Manure left in fields after cattle grazed the residue piles saves timing and costs associated with manure spreading.*

Calves, once weaned, are put in the Pekrul's feedlot. The steers and the cull heifers remain there until they are finished and then they are sold directly off the farm. Owen indicated that it's in the marketing of the finished animal where good money can be made. “By keeping the calves on my farm until they are finished creates more risk but on the other hand, my potential to increase the profit margin is also greater”, said Owen.

Replacement heifers leave the feedlot as soon as pasture becomes available and they are pastured with the cows.

With tight margins in every sector of primary production, Owen Pekrul has found a way to keep both his annual cropping operation and beef cattle enterprise profitable. Moving calving to May enables the cow herd to thrive on a rotational grazing system through the summer and a crop residue grazing system in the winter. The cow herd spreads its own manure in the fields and at the same time, adds extra nitrogen to the soil at no cost to the Pekruls. Winter grazing has allowed Owen to increase his cow herd and decrease labour and input costs. The system also uses each acre of land more than once in a given year, making the entire system more efficient and sustainable.

### **For More Information**

1-800-213-4287 or [www.ssca.ca](http://www.ssca.ca)

## **Greenhouse Gas Mitigation Program for Canadian Agriculture**

*Initiative sponsored by the Government of Canada, Action Plan 2000 on Climate Change*

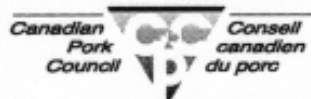


Agriculture et  
Agroalimentaire Canada

Agriculture and  
Agri-Food Canada



Canadian Cattlemen's  
Association



Dairy Farmers  
of Canada



Les Producteurs laitiers  
du Canada



The Soil Conservation  
Council of Canada