

Integration of Livestock & Direct Seeding

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Our farm is located halfway between Rosetown and Biggar in West Central Saskatchewan. Rosetown land is very flat, productive heavy clay soil. Our land is located north in the Bear Hills and has rolling hills and valleys. The south end of our farm is Weyburn heavy clay soil but as we move northward the land becomes very light and sandy.

We started out farming in a very conventional 50/50 seeding vs. summerfallow method and then gradually switched to a 75/25 split. We experimented for four years with direct seeding equipment before purchasing an air drill. It was all very exciting and quite a learning curve to do this but with the help of friends who had been direct seeding for years it made it easier. It was like making a career change. We have been direct seeding all of our land for the past 12 years.

Direct seeding turned out to be very successful and profitable for us with the odd wreck thrown in, example 1998, our area experienced the worst drought we have ever seen. We produced only 1/8th of what we normally would produce on our farm and had a cash flow problem going into the spring of 1999. We actually decided to put a couple of hundred acres of land back to summerfallow as the only people who grew any crop in 1998, were the 50/50 farmers. We took land that had a lot of Canadian thistles, chemfallowed it and cultivated it once. In August, we had a huge thunderstorm that helped to fill our crops but created washouts in the piece of our summerfallow that had only been cultivated once. We watched our 200 acres wash away and our neighbors with traditionally cultivated summerfallow lost tons of soil. Now, we all have our hangups and mine is that I cannot stand to see erosion of any kind. We have never liked watching wind erosion but water erosion is just as bad.

So another major change occurred four years ago, when we made the decision to diversify our farm into cattle after being out of that market for 20 years. We decided to plant grass on our lighter and very hilly land to stop erosion and to hopefully start to reduce crop inputs and help build the soil through plant diversity. We made a decision to seed approx. 300 acres per. year of our more marginal land to grass over the next 4 years. We are fairly new at this aspect of farming. We wanted to make use of the naturally sheltered areas of the valleys for livestock and to use the run-off to fill dugouts. Up north, where the land is flatter and lighter, the water table is also higher and we were fortunate enough to develop three spring fed dugouts.

We started seeding grass in 2000 and the spring was wet and moisture conditions good all year. The grass grew easily and looked great the next spring. In 2001, moisture conditions were not as good as a result, the grass emergence was uneven. Checking your grassland you need to be down on your knees as some of the species are very fine and, depending on the mix, they emerge at different times. In 2002, the existing grassland did not grow well due to drought and grasshoppers and any land seeded to grass that year did not do well. This past year, we had a wet spring with lots of snow and it looked very good. The 3 year old grassland looked great and we got good grazing out of it. Then the tap shut off and anything we seeded this year and in the last 2 years took a kicking again !! We will not even talk about the impact BSE has had on our farm.

Tips for direct seeding forage crops: Treat it like a crop!!!

1. Have the land reasonably clean by doing a burn-off with Round-up in the fall.
2. Plant fairly early.
3. Seed shallow and check your machines constantly to make sure your depth is constant.
4. Fertilize with phosphates, we use 11-51-0.
5. Monitor growth by getting down on your hands and knees.
6. Weeds may look fierce the first year but the grass plants will spread out by the second year and fill the gaps.
7. Monitor for grasshoppers, they love new grass. Spraying outer edges helps.
8. There is no solution for drought but even snow melt makes a huge difference to how your spring grazing plots can look.
9. If you are not sure what to grow, look at the natural species growing in the ditches. Chances are that is what you should be growing. Ask questions.
10. Remember this is a crop that can last a long time. The initial costs are high due to seed prices but it can be a permanent cover crop if managed properly through rotational grazing practices. Treat it like a crop and it will produce for you.