

# Something to ponder while mowing hay

Tom McConnell, Director, West Virginia Small Farm Center of the WVU Extension Service

I love to mow hay. That precious time mowing is when I have an opportunity to ponder about the big picture on the farm and how it is going. It seems harder and harder to make a small herd of beef cows resemble an agricultural enterprise as opposed to a very expensive hobby. As I mow that hay with a three day forecast for clear weather, I tend to forget the expensive winter and focus on the good times. Here are some things you can ponder as you mow hay.

I read an article recently where it was suggested that when the margins are slim, don't try to catch up by chasing production. This is correct. An example, if your calf check doesn't go far enough, don't manage toward more production like heavier calves by feeding them. The law of diminishing returns will work against you as the cash outlay to do this will be very high and the net margin from each increased unit of production will be less. In commodity agriculture the key to profitability is efficiency. Dr. Barton Baker at WVU when asked about what he and others learned from the many years studying the families with the Allegheny Highlands Project of the 1960s and 1970s, replied, "those that spent the least made the most!" He went on to explain that after the fertility needs were met and the farmers used good genetics, conservative management was the most profitable.

Conservative management would include a strict culling program that focuses on producing a short calving window. The long-term solution should be to decrease feed costs for the cow and increasing weaning weights of the calves. Getting those non-productive cows now will provide more feed for you herd.

Feed costs are always the place to start when trying to become more efficient. Depending on whose budget or operation, feed is always at least 50 percent of the annual cow costs. The more days your cows effectively graze the lower your feed costs are. We can't do this immediately but most of us can add a few days of grazing to both ends of the wintering period starting this fall, by rotat-

ing our pastures this summer and stockpiling our meadows. Working with your county extension agents and USDA professionals you should probably rethink your stalking rate.

The expenses associated with growing, harvesting and feeding hay offer opportunity for great savings, too. Farmers must develop a nutrient cycling plan that gets more manure back onto the meadows. The little bit of phosphorus and potassium that leaves the farm in the cattle is insignificant compared to the waste associated with feeding the cows on the same paddock year after year.

Reducing hay equipment costs is a very important place to look for reducing cost of production. Very few beef farms make enough hay to actually make a baler pay for itself. Convenience can be very expensive. Hiring your neighbor to perform one or another part of your haying operation can reduce your haying expense. Many farmers can hire their baling done for less than a baler depreciates in one year.

Another option is owning equipment together. This practice is taking hold in the corn and wheat belts; the high price for equipment has made those farmers choose that option more quickly than here. I recently received a publication from the Midwest that focuses on equipment sharing. It stressed the key to success is a cooperative personality and rock solid agreements as to use and price. One farmer in a shared equipment arrangement said that he enjoyed the renewed neighborly aspects more than the monetary savings.

Another option, as one of my colleagues suggested, don't make any hay – buy it all. For this to work a farmer must reduce the number of days you are required to feed your cows. The argument is, you may increase the number of cows you can run; but remember the value in reducing harvested hay and grazing those meadows. Having no equipment to rust, breakdown, and depreciate is a very good position to be in.

Saving hay by storing it in a building has to be considered very seriously. Some tests reveal that a farmer can lose up to 40 percent

of hay stored outside. It is the single most sensible risk management option for winter feed. In good years, save and protect your hay, and in those dry years tap into the extra stored hay. It is imperative to control the cost of this building, but the payoff period to pay off the investment is shorter than you might think. You will feed your cows more hay from a bale stored inside than one stored outside.

This discussion should get you through your first cutting. Now something to ponder for your second cutting and brush hogging – consider the one production system that is worth chasing; adding value to your cattle by selling them to your neighbors as beef – not as a commodity!

## Agriculture Commissioner Delivers \$50,000 for Flatwoods Farmers' Market Construction

West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture Gus R. Douglass presented Braxton County businessman Greg Skidmore with a \$50,000 check May 4, to formally kick off the Flatwoods Farmers' Market project.

The new market – to be built just off Interstate-79 near the entrance of the Flatwoods Factory Outlet Stores – is one of three to receive grants from the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) to create year-round farmers' markets.

Small agribusinesses need farmers' markets to sell their products because most of them cannot produce the immense volume required by most national grocery chains, Commissioner Douglass noted.

"Year-round markets create opportunities that would not otherwise exist for West Virginia's small agribusinesses, which in turn create West Virginia-based jobs for West Virginia citizens," said Commissioner Douglass.

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Multi-species grazing can increase a farm's pasture carrying capacity. Compared with grazing only cattle, grazing sheep and cattle can increase production per farm an average of 24 percent. A general rule of thumb is that on moderately stocked pastures one ewe can be added for each cow without affecting cattle performance or pasture condition. For example, on a typical North Central farm with 17 cows that weans 17 (500-pound calves) and adds 17 ewes an additional 2,040 pounds of lamb could be produced. If sold May 2, 2009 this translates into \$2,468.40 sold at the Weston Livestock Auction and \$3,274.20 at the New Holland Auction.

This program will provide a financial incentive opportunity to 20 farmers in a 12-county area that includes Barbour, Gilmer, Harrison, Lewis, Marion, Monongalia, Preston, Randolph, Taylor, Tucker, and Upshur Counties to add sheep to their cattle grazing operation. Farmers interested in adding sheep to their cattle operations partici-

pating in the program will be supplied fence materials with a value not to exceed \$5,100. Farmers will be asked to commit to a three year monitoring period which includes keeping track of expenses, and allowing WVU-Extension Service to monitor soil and forage changes throughout the duration of the project. Farmers who participate in the program will agree to attend a free workshop that covers the basics for incorporating sheep into their operation. Included in this workshop will be information on forages, carrying capacity, stocking rates, pasture management, watering systems, fencing needs, sheep nutrition, herd health, predators, livestock guardians, and lamb marketing. A pilot project will coordinate the pooling and delivery of sheep and lambs to the New Holland Market in Pennsylvania.

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