

Rolling Out Fertility

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The area where the bales were fed, it is easy to see a fair amount of organic matter that has been added to the soil.

One year later a highly productive pasture.

It's amazing how ignorant I have been in following the tradition of feeding hay to beef cattle. Once you're in this agricultural paradigm for so long it's hard to break the cycle of thinking. It wasn't until I actually looked at my farm's fertility levels from a nutrient management plan that I started to question my hay feeding practices and the labor it took.

Tradition for me was feeding hay close to the barn, in the barn or on a convenient paddock that turned into a muddy quagmire. I utilized homemade wooden skid feeders, hay wagons or bale rings, much to the delight of the cows. They like playing the sport of who can pull out the most hay and waste it game. Even as this was going on for years, I seemed paralyzed to change the situation because I fell into the trap of thinking cows couldn't survive without being near a barn.

Change doesn't come easy when the old-timers keep reminding you, "That'll never work in a Northeast winter". Three things happened to shake my brain cells loose. I read a lot of back issues from *The Stockman Grass Farmer* and 1930's vintage agricultural books, met some very successful out-wintering cattle farms and saw all the nutrients on my 100 acre farm confined to about 20 acres. Couple that with the high price of fuel and fertilizer, old equipment, older bones, lazy cows and you have a recipe to alter your mind. It seems foolish to ride the feed and cleanup merry-go round when the cows can do it all with a little planning and management.

My winter feeding formula is to first, try and plan to graze longer into the season by utilizing stockpiled forage. Second, move all the feed (I now buy all my feed) to where you need the nutrients (usually the farthest field from the barn) before winter and third, move the cows to the feed and close the gate. Sound simple? When it works like that it could be.

Last winter I only started a tractor once a week, usually to move bales around to strategic places and keep a path open in case of horrid weather. It wasn't without work however as rolling out

round bales in the snow can be challenging but I saved money on a gym membership. I would recommend pushing bales downhill or on the level. Rolling out a bale of hay is like spreading a load of manure. This is especially advantageous if the terrain doesn't allow for much equipment. The cows eat the hay, defecate and lay down, pretty cheap barn and nutrient transfer. Ohhh, the waste you say!

The grazing aficionado, Jim Gerrish tells me that a ton's worth of these big bales are worth 60 bucks just for fertilizer value alone with today's fertilizer prices, plus the 800 lbs of organic matter and other micro-benefits gobbled up by the soil flora. He says, "If you buy hay for sixty dollars a ton you either get your feed for free or free fertilizer." In addition, if you only roll out enough hay for 1 day, the wastage should only run around 10%. Compare that to 5-8 % with

ring feeders and add in the fertilizer benefits plus the advantages for Highland cattle of allowing for more access for timid animals to the hay. Now that makes dollars and sense.

This simple strategy has totally transformed those fields with the familiar pale grass with spotty urine patches of green into a dense, thick carpet of diversity forage teaming with biological life, all in one season. It's truly remarkable to witness the transformation and all it took was a change in behavior.

The next time you're frustrated with the baling dead spots think about the possibilities of what you can do on your farm. Even if you could graze a little longer or feed out in the back reaches of the farm for a month, it's worth the effort. Spring grass with a full root system and packed with groceries makes you money. That's something we can all celebrate.



Unroll enough hay for one day. This will allow good access for all the cattle and minimize wastage.