

Winter Grazing Successes in Montana

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Maintaining an economic viable livestock operation is what keeps the beef industry number one in Montana. Every ranch has their individual goals and objectives to accomplish this task. However, as public opinions influence how ranchers care for the environment and the costs of doing business compared to ranch income gets tighter, it is more important than ever for ranchers to share what techniques are producing successful results on their operations. “Winter Grazing Successes in Montana” a Southwestern Montana GLCI publication, features sixteen ranchers across Montana who share some of their management techniques. These management techniques include the implementation of practices to protect water quality, enhance ranch productivity and sustain or improve their vegetative resources.

One of these ranches, Lon Reukauf’s, Cherry Creek Ranch, in eastern Montana north of Terry, operates with the objective of balancing the environmental feed source with the animals needs. Lon relates, “My goal is to avoid the deadly three I’s: Interest, Iron, and Input costs and to maximize the two P’s: Profit and Product quality.” According to Lon, “When high input operations on naturally high productive lands can barely work, high inputs on low productive land results in a net financial loss.”

Lon has a lifetime of experiences on this ranch he grew up on, which helps him understand the environment and resources he has to operate with. He manages his cows so their reproductive cycle and nutritional needs can be more closely balance with the environment. He uses weather data to help make management decisions. One hundred and fifteen years of weather data shows his ranch location has a high chance of cold weather in early March and severe equinox storms around the end of March. Avoiding calving during these weather conditions reduces feed needs and the cost of disease control, which are both good reasons why he adjusted his calving season.

He moved his calving season to start later in the year so he can take advantage of the high level of nutrition provided by spring forage growth. He may not entirely avoid spring storms, but the use of the early growing Crested Wheatgrass fields in the spring helps him match the higher nutritional needs of the cows during post-partum lactation through breed back time. Calving in larger pastures later in the spring has minimized the cost of disease control because Lon says, “Calf scours and diptheria are nonexistent.”

Eighty percent of the cows calve as a result of exposure to the first heat cycle. The later calving date has increased the number of cows bred during the first heat cycle and gives him the opportunity to cull cows that don't calve in two heat cycles. He does however, run an eighty-day breeding season that allows him to sell bred cull cows, which provides more profit than dry cows. Calves are weaned early, the middle to end of October, which lowers the nutritional requirements of the cows for 60 days prior to the third trimester of gestation, again decreasing costs. Lon sees improved profit from early weaned, lighter calves that sell for more dollars per pound and are cheaper to raise.

Lon minimizes the cost of wintering by also extending the grazing season and using corn gluten as a protein supplement. Corn gluten is cheaper source of protein and very low in starch that makes it a very good supplement that can be fed effectively every other day. To do this he makes use of three separate summer grazing systems, a six-pasture rest-rotation system and two different three-pasture deferred rotations. The use of the Crested Wheatgrass in the spring allows him to minimize the amount of supplemental hay he feeds plus saves the native range for later use. To get better use of fall and winter forages he strategically locates "bait stations" of mineral, salt and protein blocks in areas with extra forage and away from critical areas. None of these "bait stations" are placed within one-half mile of water during the winter. Lon says, "The condition of riparian areas are enhanced when grazed in the winter because cattle spend less time in the low riparian areas where the cold air stays."