

Livestock Production

Reduce your winter feeding costs

By LON TONNESON

YOU can save money with swath grazing, according to researchers at the USDA Agricultural Research Service's Northern Great Plains Research Laboratory in Mandan, N.D.

They conducted a four-year study of swath grazing and found they saved 24 cents per day per cow from mid-November through mid-February compared to feeding the cows in a corral or near a barn.

With a herd of 200 cows, you'd save more than \$4,000 each winter, says Don Tanaka, USDA ARS soil scientist.

You save money by swath grazing because you don't have to start up a tractor to feed cows.

You also don't have to remove and store manure from winter cattle corrals. Instead, the cattle distribute the manure naturally as they graze, improving soil quality and crop production, Tanaka says.

Swath feeds

The USDA ARS study was part of a test of a three-year crop rotation to minimize use of store-bought nitrogen fertilizer and pesticides. Scientists were looking at how livestock impacted no-till grain and forage production.

The rotation used an oat and pea mix the first year, then a triticale and sweet clover mix, followed by drilled corn the

Key Points

- Swath grazing can reduce winter feeding costs.
- Cows do most of the work instead of you and a tractor.
- In a USDA study, savings totaled 24 cents per day per head.

third year. All were grown without tillage, and crop residue was left in swaths for livestock grazing.

In each year of the study, the scientists used 20 pregnant Hereford beef cows due to give birth in March. The scientists rotationally grazed the cows on swathed oat and pea residue, then on swathed triticale and sweet clover residue, and last on swathed drilled corn. They compared those cows with others grazing swaths of western wheatgrass or feeding on baled mixed grass hay conventionally, in corrals.

"We found that the swathed forage was at least as protein rich as the baled hay, and the cows had slightly better weight gains with swath grazing annual crops," says Scott Kronberg, USDA ARS animal nutritionist.

"The nice thing about this type of diversified and flexible integrated crop/livestock system is that it provides the opportunity for producers to include legumes as cover crops, which can supply nitrogen to the soil. This benefits both



WINTER SAVINGS: Cows graze on corn swaths at Mandan, N.D. The practice helped researchers reduce feeding costs by 24 cents per day per head.

the crops — by raising their yields — and the cattle by boosting the protein in their feed," Tanaka says.

More information

For more information, contact Tanaka at 701-667-3063 or visit www.nps.ars.usda.gov.

Portions of this article were excerpted from "Bringing Back the Cows With Swath Grazing," published in the July 2008 issue of *Agricultural Research*.



SWATH FEED: A combine leaves swaths for cows to graze.