

Fitting Grazing Strategies to Your Environment

Douglas Olsen
Olsen Ranches, Inc.
Harrisburg, NE
www.olsenranches.com

Olsen Ranches, Inc. is a diversified beef cattle and crop operation in western Nebraska. Douglas Olsen and his father Arthur Olsen manage this fourth generation family operation near Harrisburg. The operation consists of a Hereford/Red Angus commercial beef cattle herd, registered Hereford herd and a predominantly no-till dryland and irrigated farming operation raising wheat, corn, millet, peas, alfalfa, barley, and annuals for grazing. The cow herd is managed to maximize grazing days and to minimize mechanically harvested forage fed to the cows. Olsen Ranches, Inc. is a primary reference herd for the American Hereford Association National Reference Sire Program. The progeny are retained through harvest and finished on the ranch with records maintained from birth through carcass, including feed efficiency data on the steer calves.

The Olsens' cows calve from May through July on grass, with calves weaned in early to mid-November. All cows and heifers have one opportunity for artificial insemination. Cows winter on corn stalks before heading back to pasture in the early spring. The calves are wintered on crop residue with some supplemental feed before going to grass in the spring. The steers are fed at the ranch through the summer and harvested in November. Non-replacement heifers are also fed at the ranch to harvest.

All ranch managers are given a set of resources that are available to them. Each operation must choose which resources to use and how to use them. Forage resources that are available are influenced by your soil, water, and vegetation and the interaction among them. Olsens manage mature cows, young cows, and calves or yearlings on the various resources in different areas of the ranch. Other than predominately cool-season native grass, the Olsens utilize cool-season introduced grass, irrigated pasture, stockpiled forages, flash grazing, windrow grazing, cool-season annuals, and cornstalks or other crop residue for grazing. With the limited amount of grass that was produced in 2012 and the desire to rest the native grass more in 2013, Olsens fed some of the cows for a couple weeks in late April and early May and also planted more annual forages in 2013 to compensate. More species of annuals were included in the grazing blends or cocktails in 2013 to benefit forage quality and soil health.

Range and pasture usage is monitored with a pasture usage spreadsheet and photo points in the various pastures. Cattle are rotated through the native grass, allowing most pastures to be grazed 2 to 4 weeks out of the year in

addition to a flash-grazing event to take advantage of Downy Brome in late April or early May. Irrigated grass or spring annuals allow most animals to be off the native grass from early to mid May through late July. Thus, the most demand for native grass is August through November. Calves are weaned at a fairly young age in November to allow the cows to be more mobile to travel to cornstalks. Cornstalks are a very important part of the grazing system with cows grazing stalks 4 to 5 months of the year.

Each operation must decide how to manage its available forage and grazing. Olsens acknowledge that what works in their own operation does not work for every other operation. However, the managers of any operation must commit time resources to gather the best information available in order to be as knowledgeable as possible regarding options for grazing management.