



Prairie Update

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Winter Feeding Made Easier – And Less Costly!

Tim Corcoran and Kathy Brownlee run a 350-head cattle operation near Crane Valley, on the outskirts of the Missouri Coteau. Like many producers, they're always looking for ways to give their operation a boost.



Certain varieties of millet, with their waxy leaves, are well suited to swath grazing through the winter months.

Last summer, the pair decided to try swath grazing their herd through the winter, in an effort to cut back on input costs. Making the switch to a less-intensive management system was an

easy decision to make, particularly given the cost of fuel at that time.

"It's getting pretty expensive to bale and haul feed in. This way, you just take your cows to the feed, so it's a little cheaper," says Tim, who notes that at one point last year their fuel bill was three times higher than it had ever been before.

With some financial assistance provided by the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority through the Government of Canada's Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk, Corcoran and Brownlee installed four miles of perimeter fencing around three quarters that were previously being cropped. That new pasture area lets them defer grazing on three quarters of native prairie pasture until mid-summer.

Corcoran and Brownlee were able to access funds from the Habitat Stewardship Program because their native prairie pasture is home to several Burrowing Owls. By deferring grazing on the native pasture until mid-summer, they keep the cattle from interfering with the owls' crucial nesting period and allow their native grass to get the most out of its spring growth cycle.

While Corcoran acknowledges that their first priority was to enhance their own bottom line, they were pleased that their project would also help an endangered species at the same time.

"I knew the Burrowing Owls were there. I had seen them a couple-three times in the last two or three years. And they just come and go, and I leave them alone," Corcoran says.

"I was going to do this anyway, and if it helps the owls, that's good."

The pair completed the perimeter fencing last fall, in time to move the herd into a paddock of swathed millet at the start of November. Now, at the tail end of their first winter using their new grazing strategy – and a tough winter at that – they're reasonably happy with the results.

"It was kind of a brutal winter for swath grazing. All that wind made it a little hard. But we ended up leaving the cows there until February, so it wasn't too bad, really," says Corcoran.



Corcoran and Brownlee lead their cattle back to the corrals in February, after the herd spent almost four months swath grazing.

"We may only have got about half the winter out of our swath grazing, but that's quite a bit of feed for 350 cows that you don't have to put up. So it saves quite a bit of money."

Corcoran points out that not only did swath grazing save fuel and wear-and-tear on his machinery, having the cattle out on pasture also reduced the amount of manure accumulating in his corrals, leaving less clean-up work this spring.

Corcoran and Brownlee plan on swath grazing again next year, and are already thinking about ways they can improve their system. They plan on building some portable windbreaks and on installing crossfences to create smaller paddocks, both of which will help improve feed utilization. And they're also looking at diversifying their forage base.

"The millet was good, but I wouldn't mind trying some barley too. There are a few people around here who do it, and they seem to think that barley is as good as millet or better," Corcoran says.