Walker County Agriculture News Update

August 2015

Greetings from the Walker County, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension office!

The **TAMU Beef Cattle Short Course** is in full swing over in College Station. If you didn't have the opportunity to go this year, you missed an exceptional program.

Brush Control Demonstration underway. I had the pleasure to spend a nice warm day with Dr. Barron Rector and James Jackson as we established an IPT Honey Locust Control Demonstration here in Walker County. The video is posted online if you would like to take a look at https://youtu.be/Ituogsirb1s

Honey Locust trees treated with an IPT foliar herbicide application in Walker Co.

Feral Hog Management Workshop
September 4th, 2015 -Brazos County Expo Complex

BRYAN – A Feral Hog Management Workshop will be offered from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Sept. 4 at the Brazos County Expo complex, 5827 Leonard Road in Bryan.

The program is free, but $15 for a catered lunch. RSVP for the meal by Aug. 28 by calling 979-823-0129. Five Texas Department of Agriculture continuing education units will be offered: one integrated pest management, one laws and regulations and three general.

"Feral hogs continue to be a primary issue in terms of damage to pasture and rangeland for landowners across Texas and certainly in the Brazos Valley," said Dusty Tittle, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service agent for Brazos County. "This workshop will help landowners gain a better understanding of feral hog biology, methods that we can incorporate to better control and manage feral hogs on rangeland, plus laws and regulations of hunting the feral hog."

Other topics to be discussed include population dynamics and research update; water quality in the Brazos Valley, agricultural regulations regarding feral hogs; feral hog control and trapping; feral hog transportation regulations and disease concerns.

The program is sponsored by AgriLife Extension and a Clean Water Act Section 319(h) nonpoint source grant from the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. For more information, call 979-823-0129.

In This Issue:

What if?

Again, another of the issues identified during our AgriLife Extension, Texas Community Futures Forum. Alternative beef product supports concepts that rotate around new or small landowner education along with beef cattle marketing which was identified as items of high importance.

Before you can market them, you "got to have them". If you have them, you have to feed them. Marketing will come later on. We mainly will focus in this article on a few common production options and the related feeding options for alternative production methods.

Cattle are not cheap. I didn't tell you anything you weren't aware of just then. With current prices, initial investment situations or fully restocking depopulated pastures are not something most landowners will jump into quickly. Based on feeder heifer numbers reported in the last weeks, it seems that a number of pastures across the nation are being restocked. Based on that information it seems that enough individuals are confident in the health of their pastures and ready to reenter the beef market.

Alternative Beef Production Options
By Reggie Lepley, CEA-AG

All progressive beef producers will sit down at some point and play with the options and numbers to figure out if there is another way to produce and market their products. There has to be a way to do it in a more economically profitable manor is the general thought of anybody looking over their yearend enterprise books.

The list of alternative beef production options that are currently popular include:

- Organic Beef
- Natural Beef
- Niche Beef (breeds or specialty product)
- Locally Sourced Beef
- Grass-Fed Beef

Developing beef in an alternative system may allow the producer to market animals at a premium price. Combine alternative beef with a sound marketing plan and you may just have something everybody wants or something somebody wants to pay extra for.

Organic production of beef is outlined by the USDA's certified USDA organic program. As you would expect, there are specific criteria that are required. Generally the items of importance include organic management from the last third of gestation, no antibiotics or growth hormones, grains and forages must be organic, a certain percentage of the forage must be pasture as well. As an additional requirement the processor of the organic meat must be certified.

So you understand the implications. Any animal which becomes injured or sick requiring treatment must be removed from the program. Your facility costs just went up with that one. Speaking of costs, if you finish organic beef on grain, expect the production expenses to go up considerably due to the cost of organic grain.

I would suspect that the consistent availability of organic grain could be an issue for small or non-integrated producers as well.

Natural beef is a bit of a gray area, somewhat. Technically this label only refers to the product and not the system of production. Labeling for the end consumer is a confusing issue. I am convinced few people cruising through the meat department at the local grocery store truly understand product labels.

Just to be clear, that statement applies to the rest of the grocery isles as well.

Animals that fall out of one production option may fall into this one or they may fit by designation from several others. Animals qualifying as natural could be produced via organic, grass fed, grass finished or grain finished systems.

Production of natural beef follows basic standards of no artificial hormones, antibiotics or other additives in feed which promote growth increases. Furthermore a natural designation for beef products will stipulate minimal processing methods which are allowed

Specialty breeds of cattle are the **niche** segment growing in popularity for a small portion of the total consumer market. It seems that high disposable consumer income supports growing desires for expensive, quality uniform marbled cuts of meat for a smaller but growing segment of the consumer world.

A few years ago, I was fortunate to be with a fine group of people in a renowned steak house here in Texas. This was during a somewhat annual dove hunt and we were eating some really good steaks. It was a good night for me.

One of the guys in our group was unhappy with his steak because it had too much fat in it. He wasn't one of the two or three "Ag" guys in the group. The concept of needing some adipose tissue on and around a steak to get marbling within the steak and thus a high eating quality just didn't compute.

Our unhappy end consumer would have fallen somewhere into the "Compute" category by profession if I remember correctly.

Maybe the kitchen was a little lax on their trim job; maybe it was just the steak. Uniformity of product presented to the end consumer is always a concern with the beef industry. Product uniformity is something that we need to strive for at all levels of the beef industry. After all, we want the consumer to come back for the quality product we are producing.

To shorten the story, this gentleman who was unhappy with an exceptionally high quality prime grading cut of meat would have both the finances and desire to purchase beef from these specialty breeds inferred previously.

The currently popular and most widely recognized breed and strains of cattle that produce high levels of uniformly marbled meat just happen to be from Japan. These cattle include heredity from British and Continental breeds during the crossing phase of development. After they quit importing new cattle into the country, the beef producers began linebreeding. Linebreeding for single traits does interesting things if you have the time. You will also need the finances to carry you through the failures.

There are other breeds of cattle known to quality grade extremely high as well, and they just might surprise you if you didn't already know about them.

Locally sourced beef by my prediction will be the production concept that will interest most of our local beef producers. I think there are some possibilities here for this option. We have a number of beef producers working on these type systems and I like what I hear. If you have an idea, flesh it out. It just may be a winner.

My personal take on locally sourced beef is that this may not be a production system so much as a combined production/marketing effort to create somewhat of a niche market.

If you can sell your product with a marketing spin to attract motivated consumers you are almost there. When you provide a consistently dependable quality product which draws your consumer back for repeat experiences, you have achieved a successful enterprise.

One of, it not the hottest alternative beef production concept is the **grass fed** movement. This seems to be popular in the press and social media circuit. We are seeing more grass fed products in the stores albeit you will need to visit a grocery outlet with a larger specialty meat department to find a wide array of grass fed products.

We have producers in Walker County that are marketing cattle as grass fed on a very limited scale. It can be done as a specialty product. The larger regional to national beef brands which are marketing cattle as grass fed produce their products in ways that we just can't do here. I'll mention some of their techniques periodically throughout the forage discussions further into this article. Their methods help to insure consistency of flavor within the product line. You should also note that grass fed and grass finished beef are not the same product either.

Consistency of flavor for the end consumer could very well be a limiting factor with local grass fed marketing here.

My personal experiences with grass fed beef are not what I would call positive. Granted these were all animals out of our pasture or those of other local producers. Some were actually mature animals ready for harvest and some were problems that had to go and the freezer was the best option to adsorb a loss.

The best way I can explain my experience with grass fed flavor is “somewhat of a wang”. For this reason when shopping the meat department I may stop and look at grass fed products but I just can’t make myself open my pocket book.

If you have some really good flavored grass fed beef, I am willing to be educated. Send me a steak and I’ll give it a try.

I would be interested to see some university data on the subject of consumer preference for grass fed beef. To think of it, that would even make a nice local demonstration. Anybody interested in doing (and financing) an exceptionally expensive result demonstration with the Extension Office? Call me, we will talk.

Viable alternative production options for feeding beef may just depend on available forage systems where you are growing those cattle. Beware and forewarned; some of this may start to sound like my write up on the “Food Shed” issue. It depends on where you are..

Let us lead off with the most popular of these forage systems. Producing cattle on short duration forage systems. Some of the forage options on the table for “alternative” beef production include:

Cool season forage options are most attractive in our area of the state. Why? Simply put, because we can. It is possible to *consistently* grow small grains, ryegrass and various legumes in our area.
Did you notice the emphasis in the previous sentence? I’ve already mentioned consistency once as being an ongoing issue of concern within the beef industry.

These forage systems require high levels of management and attention to soil fertility, but they return exceptionally high quality (% crude protein) with potential for large tonnage per acre.

Here is a related off topic warning, an opportunity for a teachable moment which Extension Agents have trouble passing up follows. These crops consistently fit a late winter/spring calving season for our cow calf producers extremely well. The reason cool season forages are so popular here is we need high quality forages through the spring for heavily milking cows. Remember the basic beef management concept notation– feed for lactation, not gestation (always prevent calving problems when and where you can).

Okay, we are back on topic. Another benefit to look forward to, our cool season forages are relatively free from disease or insect issues after we successfully get into the growing season; this helps the grower sleep better at night.

The downside of cool season forages? As with anything, there are several issues to be aware of. These include: dry weather during the establishment phase, low soil pH levels, soil fertility costs, and higher management coupled with increased knowledge requirements for proper growth, grazing and seed production (if) this is a desirable option within the system.

Quite honestly, for our purposes of this discussion these systems should be treated as an annual establishment crop.

With the goal of producing pounds of beef on acreage you shouldn’t want to produce seed. For maximum production utilization, graze these pastures to the fullest extent while maintaining the growing stand through the season. Replant each year!

This should go without saying, when you are replanting each year; you automatically know that you are looking at full establishment costs each and every year.

Extended cold can slow or even prevent growth until later in the spring on some years. That was an indirect reference to the next and largest issue with cool season forages.

The elephant in the room on cool season forages, if you look over there in the corner you will see him, is that we really want to call these winter forages since we plant them mid to late fall. Unfortunately that is just not the case. These plants are cool season producers meaning we will see some emergence growth during the winter depending

on the species, but the production curves are later into January through May/June with variability depending on the forage species. For this reason these fall into the short duration cool season category.

These type forages also fit well with traditional stocker type operations, and those buying replacement heifers for growth/development and later resale. Simple numbers on pasture grazed for a short time.

Cool season forages work well with various methods of grazing management such as: limit grazing, rotation grazing, first-last grazers, creep grazing, and strip grazing systems of management. They can supplement adequate amounts of dormant perennial pasture in a stockpiled forage system as well.

FYI some portions of the country grow cool season forages through a much extended season later into the year. Interested in shipping your cattle up in a northern direction for finishing on grass? I believe I told you I would mention (some) of the methods of producing a quality uniform grass fed product. That's often part of their equations.

Another method for producing grass fed cattle can include the use of stored forages. Read on..

Short duration **warm season forage** options are available for our area, but not anywhere as attractive as our warm season perennial grass pastures. Perennial grass crops don't come with an annual seed cost, fuel to plant and labor to get it into the ground every year.

You won't usually get the returns grazing most of the warm season annual forages you would get if you were harvesting for quality stored feed. I had some trouble writing that, it depends on the growing season and the species you are working with.

The warm season annual crops may be grazeable; however, destruction of the crop and little to no production beyond the initial graze may be a real issue. Summer moisture levels and continued plant growth are much less dependable than during the cool season.

Much like our discussion in the previous Organic Production newsletter article, things are not always exactly what they appear. Grass finished, means on pasture throughout the production which carries management experience and skill levels to a whole other level. On the other hand, grass fed doesn't' necessarily have to mean grazing on pasture. What was that?

I guess it may be time to throw the next wrench into the mix. Get ready sports fans, a little basic agronomy information coming up now. Corn and grain sorghum are grasses which produces a grain. Silage is accepted as a feed which may contain grains depending on type and kind. Since both of these crops are not really considered forages, are we talking grain fed or grass fed at this point?

Regardless of whether we are discussing corn silage, forage sorghums, sudangrass, millets or crabgrass we are mostly limited to rolling these plants up for hay in our area of the state.

Other parts of the country can harvest these crops for later feeding much more dependably than we can. This is usually done in the form of silage or a similar product. Stored warm season forage silage allows those with experience building and mixing rations or supplementing pasture to meet the nutritional needs of their cattle.

This storage process with silage is based on harvesting high moisture, moderate % crude protein crop and then fermenting it in a structural container of some sort. This has to be done in the absence of oxygen. The structures containing the silage are somewhat to very expensive and of a single dedicated use. Moisture levels have to be closely monitored, both during harvest and the fermentation stage. Fermentation allows the sugars contained in the plant cells to oxidate and feed lactic acid producing bacteria, which lowers the pH and thus allows extended storage of the product.

If you miss the management requirements for the moisture levels (put it up too wet or keep it too wet in the container) the silage will get overly hot and basically cook your protein compounds causing an indigestible product.

That last issue of moisture is our challenging limitation on silage production in this part of the state.

With traditionally high environmental moisture and humidity levels we are most often limited to grazing or storing of dried forage (hay) during the warm season. Ironically enough, this is the reason that silage is attractive to the rest of the country; they can harvest and not be so much at the mercy of the weather for putting up dry hay forage.

That statement falls into the category of “Things that make you go hmm...” It depends on where you live as to what your options are; refer back to my “Food Shed” news article for a review if needed.

The storage method of these crops affects the feeding value of the forage greatly.

Warm season forages can produce a good to exceptional amount of tonnage per acre however, the dependence on rainfall for additional seasonal harvesting often limits these future harvests. In an area where irrigation systems are relatively few, well you may see my point.

What are the problems associated with growing warm season annual forages? Dependence on “iffy” rainfall throughout the entire growth season, coupled with late cool season temperatures slowing planting or early growth, insect damage, the challenge of storing a usable product and then potential toxicity issues affected by weather create a list of challenges.

All this equals high levels of knowledge and management to be required. Warm season forages fall into the advanced manager category, if you don’t get it right, you can kill cattle. I think we will save the details of the toxicity issue (nitrates & prussic acid) discussion for a later date.

As with anything, you need to know what you are doing before you jump into the pond with both feet while holding your check book.

If you have questions or would like more information regarding Extension Educational Programs, call us at (936) 435-2426.

Reggie Lepley

Reggie Lepley,
County Extension Agent – Agriculture & Natural Resources
Walker County
(936) 435-2426