

Getting More from Your Grass Pastures When Raising Dairy Heifers

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Allowing heifers to harvest their own forages through grazing has always and continues to be an economical way to feed heifers. The question or dilemma then becomes how can you better use this resource to effectively and economically raise heifers and extend the grazing season. Some suggestions to accomplish these goals are outlined below for you to consider to improve your grazing system.

1. Incorporate clovers into the pasture forages. Legumes, such as clovers, fix nitrogen for the grass plants in the pastures. But, more importantly from an animal standpoint, legumes increase the amount of forage heifers eat and even at equal intakes legumes contain more energy per pound of dry matter.
2. Improve utilization of available forage by rotating heifers between pasture lots. This allows time for the plants themselves to rest, regrow, and increase plant yields available for heifers to consume. Cattle generally consume about 25-30% of the available forage with continuous grazing. With rotation of the pastures, utilization of the available forages can be increased with pastures rotated twice weekly, increasing utilization to 60%, thus increasing the carrying capacity of a given amount of pasture.
3. Keep forages green and leafy. Do not allow forages to get too mature - as seen in the spring when they go to seed. As forages mature, cattle eat less and they get less nutrients from what they do eat. By keeping forages young and vegetative, heifers need less grain and grow better. Routine clipping of pastures can help if pasture management gets behind and forage becomes too mature.
4. Do your heifers have quality forage to graze during the summer months? You need to ask yourself— in the dry and hot months of the summer do my heifers have adequate forage to eat or do I need to supplement them with different forages or stored feeds. During the heat of the summer, cool season grasses, such as fescue and orchardgrass, do not grow. Other warm season grasses, alfalfa or stored feeds need to be used to fill this time frame to maintain heifer growth.
5. Extend the grazing season by stockpiling fescue or using other forage crops. Grazed forages are cheaper per pound of dry matter than those harvested as hay. Missouri data shows that hay costs about 35 cents a pound of dry matter versus pasture at 6 to 16 cents per pound of dry matter. To cheapen the cost of a pound of gain, the Kentucky beef industry is looking at ways they can graze at least 10 months out of the year and decrease the dependency on stored forages. We should be looking to accomplish a similar goal with raising dairy heifers. Stockpiling fescue in August is one way to extend the grazing season. Green stockpiled fescue is high in sugar and protein and can support good rates of growth. Once fescue turns brown it loses its nutritive value.