



## Backgrounding Calves on Grass

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Production cost for a beef cow has increased dramatically in the last several years. CattleFax recently estimated production cost for the cow/calf producer has seen a 25% increase and from cow/calf through the feedlot phase a 56% increase since 2005. This reported increase in cost amounts to +\$32/cwt on a live weight, +\$50/cwt on a carcass weight, and \$0.72/pound on a retail basis. However, current retail prices have only increased approximately \$0.29/pound!

With that said, producers have to pay attention to “*Cost of Production*” and find ways to cut cost. Four areas one needs to consider are feed efficiency of the cow, extending the grazing season, marketing, and risk management. The later three are very important to consider with today’s rise in prices when selling calves. The rest of this article will focus on backgrounding calves on grass as an alternative to reach a more profitable market.

Cow/calf producers for years have had the option of selling calves at weaning or backgrounding for a pre-determined period of time. This decision has almost always been market driven. However, current market prices are forcing producers to look at putting more weight on their calves before marketing. Historically, the price/lb of a 5-weight (500 lbs) calf would be higher than an 8-weight (800) calf. That’s not the case with today’s high feed prices. Because cost of feed has increased dramatically, feedlots are pushing for fewer days on feed so heavier calves are demanding more money.

One’s decision to background should be determined by feed availability, whether own or purchased. High corn

and fuel prices have reduced the amount of miles a producer can afford to purchase delivered feed. If you are able to put up cheat feed/hay, then this is a no-brainer. The alternative is backgrounding calves on grass. Backgrounding on grass can offer the cheapest nutrient resource for putting on pounds of gain.

There are two common grazing systems that allow producers to graze well into the fall. Each one has its advantages and disadvantages, but the biggest advantage is the reduction of cost for processing and feeding hay (up to 75%). **Stockpile grazing** is growing forages until maturity or first hard freeze and grazing at a later date. **Swath grazing** is the process of growing forages until maturity or first hard freeze, cutting forages and leaving it in windrows, and grazing these windrows at a later date. Both systems have the opportunity to extend the grazing season for cows, heifers, and weaned calves.

Planning ahead is crucial for backgrounding on grass as this will require knowing when you plan to wean, pasture availability and what forages are growing, how long you expect forages to last, quality of your forages, and what fall grazing system you plan to use. Knowing the answer to these questions will help you be prepared to effectively and efficiently put on weight at a low cost of gain.

Let’s look at these questions individually:

### **When do you plan to wean?**

This will determine if you can immediately begin to graze stockpiled forage or will have to provide supplemental feed until pastures are ready to graze. For

those that early wean, your pastures may not have enough forage stockpiled in late summer, so supplementing feed or utilizing additional pasture for grazing will be needed. Fall grazing can occur at any time in the fall, but by delaying until sometime after first frost will ensure optimal forage yields. Regardless, how you manage your pastures and when you initiate stockpiling for fall grazing will determine how long you can graze in the fall.

### **What pastures do you have available and what forages will you be grazing?**

If you don't have pastures set aside for fall grazing, then decisions need to be made to either delegate pastures for stockpiling, or plan to provide supplemental feed throughout the backgrounding period. Pastures need to be either seeded or stockpiled in early August. There are two forage types to consider that require different management practices, cool-season perennials and cool-season annuals. Perennials are easier to plan for because most pastures consist of this forage type; however, grazing management is different. If pastures are grazed to short, subsequent re-growth the following spring will be delayed, producing less yield with risk of increased competition from weeds. With annuals, there is no re-growth the following spring after heading so residual stubble height is no concern and can be planted in early spring or August.

### **How long do you expect forages to last?**

Knowing your forage yield/acre will allow you to estimate 1) the number of grazing days you have for a set number of calves, or 2) the number of calves you want to graze for a certain number of days. This should be done when pastures have stopped actively growing, or within a week of grazing. There are several methods of estimating forage yield, but regardless of method used, always take multiple samples within the pasture and average all samples to give you your estimated yield. This will provide you with a good representation of what the pasture is producing.

### **What's the quality of your forages?**

Nutrients provided by forages, such as CP and TDN, must meet the nutrient requirements of a growing calf. Calves entering a backgrounding program should be consuming

diets that consist of 13–15% CP and 50–60% TDN. Typically most cool-season grasses in the Upper Midwest can meet those demands, but as forages mature, forage quality begins to decline, particularly energy. So pastures used for stockpiled grazing should be monitored for quality, particularly cool or warm-season natives, and if CP or TDN is deficient, then supplementation may be needed.

### **What grazing system do you plan to use?**

With stockpile grazing, one of the big disadvantages is forage quality and forage utilization, particularly with snow depths of  $\geq$  four inches. It is important to know if the forage to be grazed can compliment the grazing system for optimal forage utilization. With swath grazing, forage quality and snow depth is less of a factor. With snow depths of  $>$  four inches, windrows provide forage in a concentrated area, increasing utilization rates. With any grazing system, in order to optimize forage utilization, one must utilize rotational grazing. This can best be done using electrified fencing and rotating calves in any given spot every 3-5 days. The shorter the grazing period within an area, the better the forage utilization will be.

One more strategy to consider is when grazing stockpiled or swathed pastures, move your calves at a relatively fast pace knowing that there will be forage left behind. Then run their dam's (pregnant dry cows) behind them to clean up the remaining forage. This will allow calves to pick through and consume the higher quality forages while cows will consume the remaining lesser quality forage. This balance in forage quality consumption matches nutrient requirements of each class of animal. For more information on cow/calf management, visit the U of M Beef Team website at: [www.extension.umn.edu/beef/](http://www.extension.umn.edu/beef/).