FACT SHEET

Paddock Grazing on Farmground
Advice from FARMS producers

Prepared Jan 2022

Fencing

Perimeter fence: wood corner and middle posts with t-posts in between, and a single electric wire (need something stronger than polywire). Can leave it permanently or install yearly.

Interior fencing: pigtail style step-in posts and 660 or 880ft polywire. Quickie version: skip interior fencing and just move the water tank.

Funding: Mostly self-funded. EQIP allowed some to strategically run lines past cropground on the way to pasture and add hydrants at cropground (very dependent on your local office).

Water

Pipelines or water trucks (1000-2500 gallons) fill portable stock tanks.

Back grazing is possible if you want a single water point for many paddocks. Caution! watch out for regrowth that would get eaten and not leave enough residue (spring oats, triticale). Watch out for poisonous regrowth (sorghum sudan) – in that case, make the corridors narrow and move through them quickly.

Reduce labor: The opportunity cost of hauling water is high during the busy season. Maybe a solar well with a long supply hose + portable stock tanks? Or hire a high schooler!

Lessons Learned

• Daily moves give better forage utilization, manure distribution, trampling, residue cycling and control of residue remaining. But it’s not always practical – stay realistic about labor commitments!
• Be flexible and opportunistic. Plant when it rains!
• Paddock grazing during a big rain creates hoof pockmarking but you get to choose how that gets spread out: restrict it to one small paddock, one larger paddock, or across the field. The better your soil condition, the faster it recovers.
• Calves in tall forage: mow their very first paddock for them, it gives them a comfortable home base and they can see where the water is. At first, mow perimeters so calves can see the fencing. Once they get used to that, you can just drag a tire and knock down forage. This reduces calves getting out.
• Tune your cover crop mix to be optimal for when you want to graze that field.
Paddock sizing

Compared to set stocking, daily moves can increase your grazing days up to 2x. If you’re limited on forage, this can offset the labor of daily moves.

Do not overgraze! Residue is worth its weight in gold. If it gets dry, you’ll be glad for the residue. If it gets wet again, you can graze the field again. At first, give a paddock you think will suffice for 2 days. If it doesn’t last, move them after one day. If it lasts longer, leave them for 3 days. With experience you’ll be able to eyeball forage and gauge paddock size.

HMI have a few tools to estimate forage and forage quality, in their Advanced Holistic Management Grazing Planning E-Manual (forage assessment and STAC monitoring).

Hiring it out

It has to be convenient for the grazer – get grazers near each field.

Rates (average):
Pairs: $1.50
Feeder/yearling/heifer $0.90
Steer $1.00
(These were calculated by evaluating the costs of feeding them in a lot, Jan 2022)

Or:
$0.75 per lb gain regardless of type

How do you make sure it’s managed responsibly?
• A good relationship – mutual trust and respect
• A clear agreement with lots of details worked out
• Make sure you have final say when the cattle come off the field, with one week’s notice.

Another approach: One producer rarely invoices, but instead has received a lot of help from his grazers (spraying, planting, trucking), a blessing during busy times.

Capturing value from covers

On average, people in FARMS spent $51/ac to establish cover crops. On average, they got $20/ac worth of grazing off them, plus the soil health benefits of covers and grazing.

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