

Good gains on grass

Grazing gives an incredible opportunity to get cattle ready for the feedlot

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6 practices for good gains



Agronomist David Davis, University of Missouri's Forage Systems Research Center, says delayed weaning is one way to add more weight to fall calves. Rather than wean in April, the Center leaves calves with their mamas until June then continues to graze calves to July. The later-weaned calves gain an extra 70 pounds.

1. **Start with healthy calves with good genetics**

"You can get some calves that won't perform at all, while others will just flourish," says Dale Blasi, Kansas State University Extension beef specialist.

2. **Take cattle to grass when they're green**

Calves going to grass in lighter condition gain more readily than those in fleshy shape.

"We've done some limit-feeding of cattle prior to taking them to grass, with the intent of picking up compensatory gain," says Blasi. "We can shift [some] gain from backgrounding to the grazing period. Calves restricted prior to grass gained .15 to .2 pounds per head per day faster."

3. **Maintain forages in a vegetative state**

"The key to putting weight on calves on pasture is to keep high-quality forages in front of them at all times," says Davis.

"Manage grasses so that seed heads are prevented from emerging. Once a plant does that, the quality decreases.

"To prepare our stockpiled forages for calves, we clip the pastures to a stubble of 3 to 4 inches tall in the first part of August," says Davis. "Then we fertilize with nitrogen and pray for rain. The regrowth is about 30 days old by the time the calves start grazing it in early October."

4. **Graze winter annuals**

"Annual rye grass or cereal rye make high-quality fall pasture, and you can get tremendous gains in the fall or spring," says Davis.

5. **Match mineral supplement to forage quality**

"In spring, when the grass is high in phosphorous, you can feed a supplement with a lower phosphorous content," says Blasi.

6. **Monitor pasture dynamics**

"Some pastures inherently produce good grass and some don't," says Blasi. "The location of grass and water play a role, as does topography. For instance, we have a pasture that gets poor grazing distribution because the cattle crowd the southern corner of a hill."

In Kansas, yearlings typically come off grass weighing 800 to 850 pounds.

"Grazing forages presents an incredible opportunity to put gain on cattle," says Blasi. "And it programs them to perform well when they get into the feedlot."