

# Hay & Forage Grower

## Priceless grazing

By Dan Glenn

Rotational grazing becomes more profitable and enjoyable once the proper fence components are in place.

*The author is a beef producer from Fitzgerald, Ga.*



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Rotational grazing, or “rational grazing” as coined by French scientist Andre Voisin, has been proven to enhance production for graziers in just about every environment you can imagine. Providing rest and recovery for a properly grazed sward keeps plants in the favorable part of their growth curve for a longer period, contributes to more dry matter production, and often better animal nutrition.

Electric fencing, due to its low cost of installation per foot, has made rational grazing possible on many farms that could not have justified the expense otherwise. A single, very hot electric wire is often enough to keep properly trained cattle in place.

Not too long ago, after seeing several presentations on rational grazing, a lightbulb went off for me and I ran home, pulled up the maps of my farm, and came up with a plan. Unfortunately, the lightbulb shone with just enough brightness to hide the shadows.

I was so gung ho to subdivide my fields and move cattle I neglected to do the more laborious work of a permanent perimeter and interior electric fence installation. These are the components designed to work in conjunction with the temporary polywire subdivisions. I also didn't give adequate thought to my water and shade needs.

### **Learned from mistakes**

I attempted to use long runs of polywire that would sometimes take an hour to set up and then run off a rechargeable battery or portable solar system. We were constantly moving fence and making paddock subdivisions that looked like the borders of a shoreline; not exactly the neat rectangles I had imagined. Animals would often have to backtrack over previously grazed portions of the field to access water.

Rational grazing, just as it sounds, should be more thoughtful, profitable, and enjoyable than what we initially experienced. It seems that the more work that is involved, the more compromises one tends to make in grazing decisions, and the less efficient grazing becomes. We learned this firsthand.

After a season of leaning polywire corners and hundreds of hours on the UTV (utility task vehicle), I made the decision to build the infrastructure necessary to make my rotations more efficient and effective. Often, this only required a single strand of galvanized wire that was 32 inches off the ground, with posts spaced every 60 feet and emanating from a central, dedicated electric charging system. In places next to cropland, I went the extra step with three or four wires to ensure calves wouldn't be eating my peanut or corn crops, or worse, those of my neighbors.

### **A better water plan**

While electric fencing is typically affordable, the major expense of designing a versatile infrastructure is often providing fresh water. My farm had traditionally watered cows from a series of ponds, creeks, and seasonal water holes. I have been slowly installing water tanks throughout the farm, and in some places, limiting access to some of these suspect water sources as a part of my nutrition and herd health plan. Unfortunately, water infrastructure can seem prohibitively expensive. However, the risks associated with poor water can be as well.

A cow herd that is exposed to leptospirosis by drinking out of a stale creek can cost thousands of dollars due to infertility, subfertility, or abortion. When my farm transitioned from commercial production to a mix of commercial and registered breeding stock, I could not afford to neglect clean water. On most of our farms,

we have made the investment in permanent, concrete water troughs that are placed thoughtfully to offer some flexibility and balance installation costs with our grazing goals.

This year I will be developing a farm with portable water troughs that work off a quick connect water line. That allows for a more flexible grazing plan with less investment but will require more labor. These systems require good planning to ensure livestock have enough water flow to keep up with their intake requirements and don't destroy the trough or float after they drain the tank.

### Hidden benefits

One should always look carefully at the added expenses of installing the infrastructure necessary to practice rational grazing. However, be cautious of giving up on the investment based on budgets that don't factor advantages that may be garnered from moving your cattle frequently.

Cattle that leave manure behind can break the parasite cycle if pastures are allowed to rest for longer periods. Also, cattle that are handled daily, especially at a young age, become more docile. The financial value of docility has been undervalued for quite some time, but its effects on fertility are becoming more clear as science catches up with what many ranches have understood and valued for quite some time.

When stocking density can be adjusted, a rancher can use his cow herd as a tool. Cows can be put under a high stock density and trained to eat weeds that would have flourished on a continuously stocked farm. Higher stock density contributes to a more even distribution of manure and urine, which is in essence, fertilizer. Stockers could be used in the front half of a leader-follower system, where they are allowed just the most nutritious tops of the sward, with dry cows coming behind to clean up the paddock to the desired residual.

Most of the economic budgets I've seen online do not account for these considerations, or the difficult calculation of how rational grazing can be used to greatly improve soil health. If taking a page from the credit card marketing world, Andre Voisin might describe rational grazing as "priceless." I certainly do.

To learn more about Glenn's operation, visit [deepgrassgraziers.com](http://deepgrassgraziers.com).

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