

# 300 Days of Grazing

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Right about this time of year, the drudgery of feeding hay gets old. After months of getting out in the cold and four-wheel-driving through that giant mud-hole called the “hay lot” (or, worse yet, the “pasture”), one begins to question one’s sanity. One may even begin to talk to oneself. If you find yourself in this situation, ask yourself this question: “Am I working for these cows or are they working for me?”

## **Feed Less and Graze More**

A few years ago, Forage Extension Specialists from land-grant universities in Mississippi, Missouri and Michigan surveyed their beef cattlemen to find out how much hay they were feeding. The cold winters in Michigan keep those folks busy. They fed 130-140 days per year. The cattlemen and women of Missouri fed a lot of hay, too. They also fed 130-140 days per year. It would stand to reason, lucky as they are to live in the South and to have such a long growing season, that our fellow Southerners in Mississippi would not have to feed nearly as much. But the survey results showed that they also fed hay about 130-140 days per year.

Some of my colleagues at the University of Arkansas were seeing the same thing in their state. They were fed up with feeding so much. They knew that their beef cattle producers could save substantial amounts of money if only their cattlemen would feed less and graze more. They decided that the best thing they could do to help cattlemen in their state was to find ways to extend the grazing season. They developed a protocol and a set of recommendations that would reduce the hay-feeding period to something around 60 days or less. They called it the 300 Days of Grazing program and set out to demonstrate it on farms throughout Arkansas.

Several of you will recall that our colleagues from the University of Arkansas presented the success of this effort at the 2014 Forage Conference at the Georgia Cattlemen’s Convention in Perry. As of that date (April 2014), Arkansas producers had implemented this program on approximately 110 farms. The expenses and returns in the first five years after implementing the program were tracked on several of these farms during 2008-2013 (i.e., before the market jumped and stumbled) (Figure 1). Because of the costs associated with the conversion and major economic challenges in 2008-09, most producers made about the same amount of money the first year after switching as they did the year before implementing the 300 Days of Grazing program. But when all five years were included in the average, the 300 Days of

Grazing program resulted in an average increase in return over specified costs of \$125 per 1,000 lbs of body weight. By reporting this on the basis of 1,000 lbs of body weight, they enable all types of cattlemen to estimate their returns. For example, these results suggest that a cow-calf producer with 100 cows that average 1,500 lbs each could increase their returns by approximately \$18,750 per year (100 cows x 1,500 lbs/cow x \$125/1,000 lbs of bw = \$18,750).

## **We Can Do It, Too!**

The conditions in Arkansas are very similar to conditions in Georgia. The northern half of Arkansas is at roughly the same latitude as, and has similar soil and climate to, North Georgia. The southern half of Arkansas (below I-40) is dominated by bermudagrass and has soils and climate similar to our Southern Coastal Plain region. I know for a fact that if Arkansas can do it, we can too! How do I know? Because we have several graduates of our Grazing School who are doing this in Georgia. Some haven’t fed a bale of hay in over five years.

For producers in Georgia to reach the goal of 300 Days of Grazing, here are four key strategies to put into place:

1. Stockpile forages. Tall fescue and most hybrid bermudagrasses can be successfully stockpiled in late summer and early fall so that they can be grazed in late fall and winter. After closely grazing or clipping the grass in late summer, the forage is fertilized as if it would be cut for hay. The cattle are removed from the area and the forage is allowed to accumulate for later grazing. Specific instructions on how to do this are available on [www.georgiaforages.com](http://www.georgiaforages.com).

2. Utilize crop residues wherever possible. Beef cows can graze on the residue of corn and cotton quite readily. Work at the Southwest Research and Education Center in Plains indicated that cattle maintained body condition on cotton residue as well as cows fed bermudagrass hay, and they saved about \$90/cow during the 40-50 days that they grazed. One can routinely expect 1 acre of corn or cotton to carry 1,000 lbs of body weight for 30-45 days. With high yields and better grazing management, it may be as much as 60 days.

3. Use frontal grazing on stockpiled forage and crop residues. This grazing method will usually double the amount of time stockpiled forage can be grazed. Frontal grazing is a method whereby the livestock are allowed to graze only small strips of pasture at a time. It is so named because the cattle graze like a front moving across the pasture. Starting

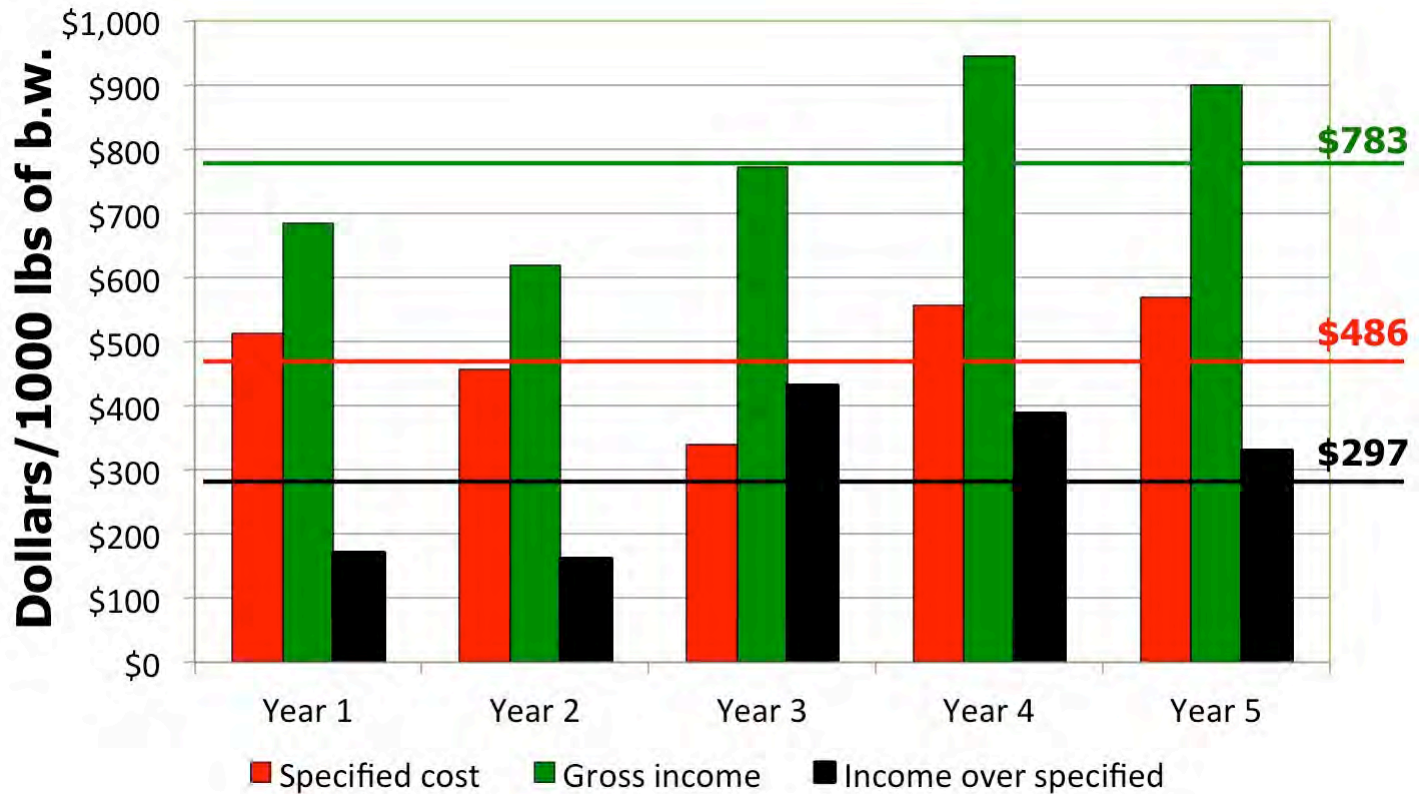


Figure 1. Income and specified costs\* resulting from the implementation of a 300 Days of Grazing program in Arkansas.  
 \* *Specified costs include as many variable costs as were reported by the participants, but do not include fixed or opportunity costs.*

on the end of the pasture where the water source is located, a small strip of the pasture (usually two to four days' worth of forage for the herd) is made available. After this forage is consumed, the front fence is moved back to allow another two to four days' worth of forage. This gives the producer a lot of flexibility, and takes a lot less time and effort than feeding hay. One of our producers who practices frontal grazing has a 13-year-old daughter who has the chore of moving the front fence every third day after she gets home from school. He says she doesn't complain much. "It only takes her 15 minutes and she likes to ride the four-wheeler." Another producer said that his favorite perk of frontal grazing is that he can actually visit family around Thanksgiving and Christmas without worrying about being home to feed the cows. He can allocate a few days' worth of grazing and he gets a neighbor's kid to check on the cows.

4. Optimize the growth of annual forages. Our ability to grow winter annual forages is one of our most important competitive advantages. If planted without competition, small grains such as oats or rye can be sown in late September or early October and can often be grazed as early as late November; and a good early-season ryegrass could be grazable by December. Forage turnips and other brassicas can be planted as early as August and grazed as early as early October.

Bermudagrass pastures are commonly overseeded with winter annual forages; but to get the earliest jump-start on winter annual forage growth, plant in pastures that are dedicated to annuals. Plant summer annuals on these acres in the spring for a high-yielding crop for grazing or baleage. Pearl millet – either grown alone or grown in conjunction with a summer annual legume such as soybean or cowpea – is a great choice for summer forage. Recent economic analyses have suggested that most Southeastern cow-calf operations should have about 10 percent of their grazable acres dedicated to winter and summer annual forages. Fall calving herds may benefit from an even greater proportion of acres dedicated to annuals.

For more information about reducing hay feeding and extending the grazing season to at least 300 days, visit our website at [www.georgiaforages.com](http://www.georgiaforages.com). There you'll find a publication entitled "Extending Grazing and Reducing Stored Feed Needs," which provides more details on how to extend the grazing season. Also on our website, you'll find specific instructions on how to stockpile tall fescue and bermudagrass, implement frontal grazing, and get annual forage variety recommendations to ensure great results. For more information about other forage management issues, visit our website or contact your local county Extension Office at 1-800-ASK-UGA1.