



Swath Grazing: A Few Tips for Harvest & Winter Set-Up

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The idea of swath grazing cattle over the winter is not a new concept, and even though it has been practiced in Alberta since the late seventies, there are still many questions on how to swath graze effectively. Research in Western Canada has shown that swath grazing can save a producer up to 40% compared to traditional, conventional methods of winter feeding, and with feed costs being one of the highest costs a beef producer faces, it is well worth it to give swath grazing a try.

When Should You Swath?

So you have a crop in the ground, with a plan to swath graze it; hopefully it's been coming along nicely with all of the summer moisture! Now comes the question, when should it be swathed? Swathing time is very critical to optimize the yield and nutritional quality of the crop. A general rule of thumb is that the crop should be swathed in the vegetative stage when the entire plant is still alive; this ensures that the composition of the whole plant is uniform. When the plants are green and leafy, the nutritive quality and yield are optimized as the protein and energy levels are ideal for wintering pregnant cows. Another rule of thumb used by veteran swath grazers is to swath it before the first frost, usually in September, but this will depend on the time of planting, the type of crop, and if there is an early season frost. If the crop is swathed later when it is more mature, you will have high yields, but lower quality. A crop swathed when it is very mature is essentially straw and grain, which can cause grain overload and other conditions associated with a diet too high in grain and precautions need to be taken. A crop that is swathed early will have a lower yield but will be high in quality and palatability. Gestation period of the cows, volume of feed needed and weather conditions are all things that need to be considered when deciding when to swath.

A Few Guidelines for Common Cereals Used for Swath Grazing in the Peace Country:

Oats

Oats should be swathed at the beginning of the milk stage, or right before the soft dough stage.

Barley

Barley matures earlier than oats and should be swathed at the soft to mid-dough stage.

Triticale

Triticale hasn't yet been widely used for swath grazing in the Peace Country; trials have been done in central and southern Alberta and we are gaining more knowledge on how to manage it. Current recommendations suggest that triticale should be swathed between the soft and hard dough stage; the window of time for swathing triticale has been found to be wider than for oats and barley. Some producers prefer to swath it in the milk stage. It is important to be sure that the plant is still green to ensure that it is palatable.

In the Event of an Early Frost...

Hopefully this isn't something you have to deal with, but just in case, precautions should be taken if your swath grazing crop is hit with frost before you've cut it. The accumulation of nitrates can occur when a crop is hit by frost or another stress such as hail when it is still in the vegetative stage and can result in the cattle suffering from nitrate poisoning. If a crop is hit with a killing frost (-4C to -6C), it should be cut as soon as possible to limit the accumulation of nitrates, or if there is a killing frost in the forecast, it may pay off to cut the crop the night before to prevent potential nitrate accumulation. If a light frost hits your crop, it will recover and the nitrate concentrations will decrease each day that the crop continues growing. If there was a risk of nitrate accumulation, send the feed out to be tested for nitrates and from there you can make a feeding plan to minimize the risk of nitrate poisoning occurring in your herd. Feeds with high nitrate levels can be fed, but great caution should be taken and the ration should be properly balanced.

A few Swathing Considerations

Depth and width of the swaths should be determined based on weather conditions and time of year that the cows will be put out on the field. Deep, narrow swaths help to minimize weathering and are ideal if you are going to use the swaths in early fall or winter. Large, wide windrows are ideal if the feed will be utilized later in the winter and if there is lots of snow, as it is easier for the cows to find and helps to reduce wastage. It is ideal to have the swath lie on top of the stubble, so that it is up off the ground.

Upcoming PCBFA Events

Keep an Eye Out For:

Triticale Swath Grazing Field Day:

October 5th

Weevil site and triticale for swath grazing with guest speakers on triticale and Power-flex portable fencing.

Grassfed Beef

School:

October, TBA

Johnny Sausage & Meats
With Guest Speakers!

Calling all You Young Farmers!

Join us at our
Financial Advice
panels:

Savanna

Sept 26, 7pm
Savanna Rec Complex

Cleardale

Oct 3, 7 pm
Cleardale School

Debolt

Oct 10, 7 pm
Debolt Community
Center

High Prairie

Oct 17, 7 pm
Big Meadow Hall

RSVP to Monika
@ (780) 523-4033

Check out our new
Website !!

www.peacecountrybeef.ca

When to Start Grazing

Grazing can begin right after the crop is swathed; it will depend on when other grazing sources run out and what kind of weather we get this fall. It is most common for swath grazing to begin in late fall or early winter. Degradation of nutrients in the forage will occur over time, so if the crop is going to be grazed later in the winter or the spring, supplementation of energy should be considered. Caution should be taken not to put the cows out too early, as compaction can occur if the ground hasn't frozen and especially if the soil is moist. If you are swath grazing for the first time, or have a new group of cows to put out on your swaths this year, it is a good idea to expose the inexperienced cows to the concept of swath grazing before there is a large amount of snow on the ground; this will ensure that the whole herd maintains good body condition throughout the winter.

Nutritional Considerations

It is important to get your swath grazing crop feed tested, to prevent any nutritional deficiencies. If the crop is cut at the ideal stage, you are less likely to have energy and protein deficiencies, but specific to swath grazing, Neutral Detergent Fibre, or NDF can be a concern. NDF is a measure of the fibre content in a feed and represents the minimally digestible cell walls, lignin, cellulose and hemicellulose in the plant cells. NDF is important when considering cattle rations because it is a limiting factor in the dry matter intake capacity of a cow. NDF increases as the growing season progresses, so if you are cutting your crop at a mature stage, looking at the fibre content of the feed is especially important. The maximum NDF intake is close to 1.2% of the animal's body weight. An excellent quality forage will have an NDF value of 40% or less and caution should be taken with high NDF levels as it will limit intake and the animals may not be able to physically take in enough feed to meet their nutritional requirements.

It is also important to test your feed to make sure all nutritional requirements are being met including protein, energy and the vitamins and minerals. Choose a mineral that will balance out the calcium and phosphorous requirements, which should be at a ratio of 2:1 or higher. Be sure to monitor your herd continuously to ensure they are not losing body condition, and having another source of feed available should you need to supplement the swath grazing is always a good back up plan, especially if some extremely cold weather comes our way.

A Few More Tips

- to reduce wastage of the swaths, provide bedding to prevent the cows from dropping manure on the swaths
- to avoid compaction in the spring, ensure the cows are moved off of the field before the first thaw; this will also prevent the cows from punching the field out
- A fencing plan should be implemented to ensure that your swath grazing plan is successful. Animals should be restricted using portable electric fencing. Alberta Agriculture has a very handy calculator on 'Ropin' The Web,' called 'Swath Grazing Calculator.' It prompts you to add in all of your grazing and animal information and then can help assess the costs associated with swath grazing and allow you to compare to a conventional winter feeding system. The link is: http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/app19/calc/swathgrazing/production_info.jsp
- Happy Swath Grazing!

A Reminder About Feed Testing...

If you've had some good luck getting feed up so far this year, now is the time to take a few samples and get it tested. On a wet year, nutrients such as protein and energy tend to be lower than a cow herd's requirements, so testing your feed can help ensure your cows won't have any loss of body condition or other issues associated with nutrient deficiencies.

Call either PCBFA office and we can help get your feed tests done and we help you interpret the results!



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