

Growing Around In Circles

Innovative fencing is helping stocker operators with pivot irrigation harvest more pounds and boost cattle health.

By Wes Ishmael
Contributing Editor

Go ahead. Have your grass and graze it, too. Non-traditional fencing systems offer the established benefits of rotational grazing on circles of irrigated ground, but without the traditional labor and management headaches.

"It will double the output of a circle if you're grazing it; I know that for a fact," says Mike Mekelberg of Yuma, CO. He's figured out a way to have stocker pasture virtually year-round by rotating cattle through a

pivot-irrigated circle divided into three, 40-acre grazing cells.

Specifically, Mekelberg plants pearl millet in the spring and Elbon rye in the fall. When planting season comes, as Mekelberg moves cattle out of one grazing cell, he'll plant it behind them. By the time he makes the circle, the first cell he planted is about ready to start grazing.

Likewise, Don and Peggy Brown, neighboring stocker operators, estimate rotational grazing on their circles has allowed them to double

the pounds of beef they can harvest. Where they used to carry 400, five-weight stockers on Elbon rye for 60 days in the winter, rotational grazing lets them extend the grazing period an extra 60-90 days. Then in the spring when the rye comes back, they'll run another 600-800 stockers through the same rotation before planting corn.

"One of the real keys is that grazing by paddock

keeps cattle from crushing plants that end up dehydrating and losing their nutritional value when it's cold," says Don. "With this, the cattle must harvest everything within the paddock so nothing is wasted."

Low-Labor Leverage

But exploiting this potential has typically come with plenty of management challenges. Most of them center on figuring out how to effectively keep cattle where you

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Don Brown fashioned this unique spring-mounted electric fence post at right. It allows the pivot to roll over it. Brown no longer moves fences while sprinkling.



Peggy and Don
Brown, Yuma, CO.



want while enabling the pivot sprinkler to continue on its irrigating rounds, growing the forage.

Some folks build a gate for each wheel of the pivot to pass through. But that means two, labor-intensive H-braces for every track – braces that later have to be removed when it's time to plant. Plus, there's burying the electric wire beneath the gate or building the riser for the wheel to pass over the top. On top of that, Brown points out that sprinklers can get out of line. When that happens, the gates aren't there anymore.

Others string regular electric fence, then let it down for the sprinkler to pass. While that sounds easy enough, from experience Mekelberg explains that if you let it down and leave, the cattle go where you don't want them. And, if you plan to show up to let the fence down just in time, well, there's plenty of ripped up fence along the way.

"You have to be careful it's not too labor-intensive," says Peggy. After all, next to health, the Browns point out the primary driver to the stocker equation is putting on gain as cheaply as possible. That includes the labor involved in feeding and managing the cattle.

With that in mind, Don developed his own method for solving the circle pivot rotational grazing puzzle three years ago. Think of a round, fiberglass fence post attached to a spring-loaded base that is then anchored to the ground with a regular old steel T-post. The sprinkler comes up to the fence,

pushes it down – with the help of a wire guide – rolls across and the fence bounces back up into place.

The new tool worked so well and simply that word-of-mouth demand from folks like the Mekelbergs led the Browns to patent and market the device as the Pivotal Fencing System™.

Beneficial Flexibility

Besides making rotational grazing easier, Don explains, "What it's done for a lot of operators is allowed them to plant one side of a circle and graze the other." Or graze both sides with different sets of cattle, which is what the Browns do.

The Browns graze established stockers on one side during the evening, and then turn out a new set of weaning calves on the other side during the day. With separate water for each, the different sets of cattle never come in contact with one another, and Brown says the cost of health decreases dramatically.

"This also extends the use of some existing pivots," Don says. In neighboring operations, he says some previously high-volume wells have lost enough steam that they no longer produce enough water to irrigate a crop like corn, yet they still put out enough to grow forage for cattle.

Bottom line, Don says, "This lets you utilize your sprinklers in a whole new manner."

For more information about Brown's Pivotal Fencing System, contact him at 970/848-5500. ♦