

Enhancing the Value of Cover Crops through Utilization by Beef Stocker Cattle: Progress Report (Year 2)

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Erika Lundy, Extension Beef Program Specialist;
Rebecca Vittetoe, Extension Agronomy Field Specialist;
Joel DeJong, Extension Agronomy Field Specialist;
Beth Doran, Extension Beef Field Specialist;
Paul Kassel, Extension Agronomy Field Specialist;
Dan Loy, Associate Professor of Animal Science;
Joe Sellers, Extension Beef Field Specialist;
Mike Witt, Extension Agronomy Field Specialist

Summary and Implications

The increase in cover crops across Iowa presents a substantial amount of potential forage available to the beef industry that would otherwise go unutilized. While the benefits of improved soil health and nutrient retention through cover crops are well known, limited data are available on utilization by beef cattle. Thus, a study was designed to measure cattle performance while spring grazing cereal rye and to evaluate the impact grazing had on the soil profile. Preliminary data suggests that with proper supplementation, cattle grazing cereal rye may achieve average daily gains of 1.5 to 3.0 lb/d. Initial analysis of soil bulk density indicates minimal negative changes in compaction due to grazing. Because many variables impact the successful integration of cover crops and livestock into row crops, this is a four-year study summarizing data from year two.

Introduction

Cover crops are an important component of the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy (2016) to improve Iowa's water quality. To meet the goal of a 45% reduction in the total nitrogen and phosphorus loads, it is estimated that the total number of acres planted to cover crops will need to be a minimum of four million acres or equivalent to about 20% of Iowa's row crop acres. This implies that millions of acres may be seasonally available for grazing.

Most of the limited research conducted on cover crop grazing has focused on integrating cover crops into row crops systems that cow-calf producers already raise. However, many Iowa row crop producers do not have a cattle enterprise. Thus, stocker cattle may be an opportunity to utilize a cover crop grazing system that allows cattle to be bought and sold based on forage availability. It is important for livestock producers to check for crop rotational restrictions on labels of pesticides used during the growing season as well as grazing restrictions if they intend to use the cover crop as a forage source.

Materials and Methods

Approximately 140 acres of crop ground were planted to cereal rye in the fall of 2016 at three ISU outlying research farms varying in soil type: Allee Memorial Demonstration Farm, Newell; McNay Memorial Research and Demonstration Farm, Chariton; and Western Research and Demonstration Farm, Castana. Soil bulk density measures were taken following cash crop harvesting prior to cover crop seeding and in the spring, pre- and post-cattle grazing. Within each field, three treatments were applied: grazed cover crop, ungrazed cover crop, and no cover crop.

Forage biomass yield and nutritional quality were also measured pre- and post-grazing. All cattle were sourced from the ISU McNay Angus herd. Individual body weights were collected prior to rye turn out and after removal from the rye to determine average daily gain. All animals were housed in dry lots overnight to account for gut fill differences before weighing.

At the Allee Farm, 31 fall-calved heifers grazed 15 acres of cereal rye, and similarly, 31 fall-calved steers grazed another 15 acres. At Castana, 40 yearling heifers grazed 32 acres. At the McNay farm, 80 replacement heifers grazed 42 acres of cereal rye. The goal was to achieve a stocking density of 2 hd/acre, but cattle numbers and forage availability dictated stocking rates, with stocking densities ranging from 1.25 to 2.1 hd/acre.

Calves at Allee and Castana were implanted the day of turnout with Revalor-G (Merck Animal Health). Due to high moisture content of the forage, cattle were supplemented with a distillers grain and soyhull-based supplement at 0.5% of body weight (BW).

Results and Discussion

As expected, nutrient analysis of cereal rye varied greatly across farms and by month of production. Table 1 summarizes the average value of the cereal rye based on the month of sampling. Overall, dry matter of the cereal rye averaged 21% indicating that the forage is very high in moisture and may limit dry matter intake.

Cattle performance and grazing days are summarized in Table 2. For the fall-born calves at Allee (466 lb average initial BW), average daily gain was 1.48 lb/d; whereas, heavier spring-born heifers at Castana (657 lb at study initiation) averaged 1.7 lb/d. Replacement heifers grazing at McNay averaged 3.1 lb/d. Differences in physical rumen size and forage yield may have contributed to the differences in gain.

Bulk density data were collected as a way to measure compaction (Table 3). Looking at the bulk density results and the soil texture of the field, the bulk density results still fall within the range of bulk densities considered ideal (less

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than 1.40 g/cm³) for plant growth according to Natural Resource Conservation Services' general relationships with soil texture (silty loam or silty clay loam) and bulk densities. Bulk densities that affect root growth would be 1.55 g/cm³ or greater.

Soil moisture is another aspect that can affect compaction. Soil moisture data were gathered from the weather stations located on the farms during the time of grazing. Soil moisture at Allee and McNay was at or above field capacity. At Castana the soils are well drained and the soil moisture was below field capacity during grazing.

Conclusions

Preliminary results from this study indicate that spring grazing cereal rye is an effective way to background stocker

cattle. Data will be collected for an additional two years and included in a final report. Ultimately, the synergy of cattle and cover crops added to row crop production across the state has the potential to increase producer profitability while improving the environment and water quality in Iowa.

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Table 1. Nutrient analysis of cereal rye based on month of sampling

Month ¹	DM ² , %	CP ³ , %	ADF ⁴ , %	NDF ⁵ , %	TDN ⁶ , %
March	31.5	18.8	28.3	30.1	66.8
April	19.8	22.0	21.6	34.1	72.0
May	19.4	21.0	25.3	37.9	62.8

¹ March, *n* = 5 samples; April, *n* = 34 samples, May; *n* = 13 samples

² Dry matter

³ Crude protein

⁴ Acid detergent fiber

⁵ Neutral detergent fiber

⁶ Total digestible nutrients (calculated)

Table 2. Cattle performance while grazing cereal rye

Farm	Sex	Initial BW ¹	Final BW ¹	Days Grazed	Average Daily Gain	Cattle Turnout Date	Cattle Removal Date
Allee	Steers	485	526	27	1.52	4/4/17	5/1/17
Allee	Heifers	447	485	27	1.42	4/4/17	5/1/17
Castana	Heifers	657	685	20	1.69	4/28/17	5/18/17
McNay	Heifers	712	795	26	3.10	4/13/17	5/9/17

¹ Body weight; 4% shrink was applied to all body weights

Table 3. Soil bulk density measurements in g/cm³

Farm	Sampling Depth	Fall Baseline¹	Spring Pre Grazing²	Spring Post Grazing	Spring Cover Crop Not Grazed	Spring No Cover Crop
Castana	0 - 6"	1.39	1.27	1.37	1.34	1.33
Castana	6 - 12"	1.35	1.31	1.34	1.31	1.31
McNay	0 - 6"	1.42	1.37	1.32	1.33	1.45
McNay	6 - 12"	1.45	1.43	1.31	1.27	1.18

¹Fall baseline is the field average bulk density

²Spring pre-grazing is an average of grazed and non-grazed cover crop area