



Grey
Wooded
Forage
Association

The Blade

"Creating an Awareness of Forages"



JULY 2015

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Due to the enormous cost of printing and postage, an additional fee of \$10 will be required from anyone wanting to receive printed copies of The Blade in the mail! This is not applicable to those who have already paid their 2015/2016 membership fees.

Effective July 1, 2015

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MISSION STATEMENT

To promote environmentally and economically sustainable forage and agricultural practices.

VISION STATEMENT

The community is engaged in regenerative agricultural production methods.

GWFA Staff photo



The GWFA Board of Directors for 2015/2016

From left to right:

Vance Graham: (Vice-Chair) As summer comes to Lodgepole Ranch, all of our farming is done until the haying starts. We have cows at a few different sites, so keeping track of them and rotating them through paddocks is always keeping someone busy. Then there is fencing; replaced some old ones and built some more cross fences. Got a little hot this afternoon so “we shut down” so someone could do some emailing. Lots of atv’s and utv’s in the west country so far this year, lots of weeds too. Could they be connected? I did get to spend a great evening watching the fireworks at the historic site with family and friends.

Andrew Ritson-Bennett: See the Producer Feature on page 10.

Deb Skeels: My husband Doug and I have a farm in the Dovercourt area of Rocky Mountain House. We currently have cow calf pairs and a few replacement heifers. As with most farmers in the area we are dealing with the lack of moisture.

Cy Newsham: I’ve been involved in farming & ranching all my life. I started my ranch west of Sundre at Bearberry in 1976. It is an 80 head cow-calf operation with back-grounded yearlings as well. I’m keeping the operation as close to organic as possible. It is a priority for me. Winter grazing and rotational grazing are very much a part of the ranching program. Development of water sources is also a keen interest of mine.

Ken Ziegler: (Chair) I just joined the Board as a farmer member this past May. I’m not new to the board as I have served the GWFA as Exofficio Director, being the Alberta Agriculture contact for many years. I live SW of Rocky where I own a cow-calf herd and bring in outside cows for the summer months to harvest the extra grass from 25+ paddocks on the 700+ acres of pastureland.

Herman Wyering: (Treasurer) I farm with my wife Joan west of Ponoka. We have a cow-calf operation, background our calves and graze some yearlings each year.

Ted Chastko: I recently joined the GWFA board. My fiancé and I have a small farm between Blackfalds and Lacombe where we direct market grass fed beef and lamb as well as pastured chicken. We practice holistic management, planned grazing and are working to build a community of young farmers in the Red Deer area. We are also apart of a farm improvement club where we meet and discuss our problems and try to find solutions. I see the GWFA as a good way to help producers expand their knowledge of grazing and forage production possibilities on their operations.

Chris Sande: My wife Brenda and I operate a cow-calf operation in the Bingley district northeast of Rocky. I’ve been involved with GWFA for a number of years and have served as a director for a couple of terms. I have gleaned a great deal of useful information from GWFA and use rotational grazing and pasture rejuvenation to increase productivity. We are currently working on a riparian project with Clearwater County & Landcare and the Alberta Woodlot Extension Society (AWES), and will incorporate rotational grazing and offsite watering to improve a lowland pasture.

Brendon Anderson: (Secretary) I worked as an electrician and a Millwright for a period of time. In 2012 my wife and I were expecting twins and we decided that it was the right choice to move back to the farm. My parents built a house just up the road and we are very fortunate to have their help during busy times. We are a relatively small operation - we calve approximately 100 cows to date, lamb a handful of ewes, we also do some annual cropping and put up all our own feed.

Manager's Notes:

By Ginette Boucher, Manager

Greetings,

We have received much of the needed moisture although for some it didn't come at the right time. For those of you with a drought management plan, you will be well ahead. If you need assistance with planning for drought protection do not hesitate to contact us.

There are many scheduled activities over the summer and into late fall to assist you in areas of interest. If you're looking for something specific and haven't seen it, please let us know what your interests are and we will do our best to provide the necessary information and find where these activities are taking place.



After attending the Soil Carbon Challenge workshop with Peter Donovan in Athabasca County, it became apparent to me that we must get the word out. Please browse the event summary by Christine Buchanan of Gateway Research Organisation who was responsible for this excellent event. Also take a few moments and browse the website on the Soil Carbon Coalition at www.soilcarboncoalition.com for a wealth of information.

The "How to Measure Soil Health" event with Jill Claperton and the "Building Soil and Creating Land" event with Christine Jones are coming upon us quickly. Be sure to register for these coming events. Being the Year of the Soils, we must focus on improving our soil for long term sustainability through proper management. This includes conserving soil moisture, improving soil structure, making sure your soil is covered with a thatch layer which will reduce soil erosion and protect it from the sun. Continuous additions of organic materials by grazing management and feeding on the land will be a great contribution to the organic matter pool and will also contribute to building the carbon in your soil.



We have implemented the policies discussed at our AGM in May relating to our single signature on checks. To continue to assure the integrity of our finances, our treasurer, who does not have signing authority, reviews our financial records regularly and signs off on the monthly bank statement. In addition to this we will continue with have our annual audit. We are currently implementing on-line banking; a move that has greatly simplified bill payments. We are also able to receive e-transfers for those interested in making payments in this way. Thank you to the membership who attended the AGM and assisted in the passing of this new bylaw. This will assist us in smooth operation of our finances and bill paying.



We are still looking for assistance with our committees. If you have any interests in contributing to the projects or public-



ity committees, please do not hesitate to contact us and we would be happy to have your participation.

Our new producer feature is under way; we feel that this will assist other producers and bring much value to the Blade. If you would like to be the producer featured for any given month, please contact us and we can add you to the list, there are many spots available. Feel free to forward some thoughts and ideas to continue to improve the Blade. We pride ourselves in the delivery of The Blade and want to continue to make it the best publication available. We welcome your feedback and look forward to hearing from you and seeing you at some of the exciting events coming up.

Ginette



Soil Carbon Challenge Workshop with Peter Donovan

Peter Donovan & Didi Pershouse lead our group through the many concepts surrounding soil carbon and sampling. Peter emphasized the importance of moving away from a "problem solving" mind set to "thinking creatively" to work towards achieving your goals.

The benefits of soil carbon were discussed along with the many processes related to carbon being stored in the soil. The idea of whole systems and looking at many facets definitely came into play.

One thing that really struck home, especially on a low moisture year such as this one, is how soil carbon plays a huge role in regards to moisture and the soils ability to retain water. Soil aggregates, porosity, plant roots, microbes & the rhizosphere along with numerous other things were discussed in relation to carbon and water retention. Later demonstrated through an infiltration test in the field

Peter has an excellent way of relating some fairly large concepts back to everyday examples that really helps put everything into perspective. One of my favorites from the day was the idea of creating change. A motor boat can create waves (immediate change) but once you stop the waves cease (short lived results), but a rock placed in a river slowly changes the shape of the river leaving its mark over time.



Christine Buchanan

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Message from the Chair

By Ken Ziegler

Hello folks! Ginette with her unending enthusiasm has asked the directors to write a short story of our lives on our home places in hopes of offering a tighter connection between us as Board members to you as a membership. Carrying the role of Board chair for this year, it seemed right that I lead the charge and offer you a small snippet of life on the Ruken Ranch (my place).

Firstly to say that I've been thoroughly blessed to live where I live and have had the opportunity to manage our land base for the past 26 years and raising 3 healthy kidlets at the same time. I remember the 26 years part as we moved here two weeks before our oldest son was born.

The experience here has been instrumental in learning first-hand the many aspects of forage production that we have learned as a forage association. I first remember seeing grazing management in its maturity in New Zealand back in '82 and then coming to work in the Rocky district as a DA. Seeing the potential of improved forage production in our pastures became a passion and in partnership with the newly formed GWFA, we explored what managed pasture production looked like.

It soon became apparent that pasture management was more than electric fences and on site water sources. We soon learned that the heart of pasture management is grazing management where we learned that the time off of a paddock was incredibly important rivaling the importance of cattle numbers and time in the paddock. Insisting on an appropriate recovery time after grazing has made a big difference in the plant's ability to regrow and regenerate resulting in a healthy stand that can last forever.

Although the fencing and water availability in each paddock has been instrumental in offering appropriate recovery times as well as improved nutrient management, the one bright spot that I'd like to share with you is a unique paddock that I have. This is a new seeding where an oil company needed to strip the top soil off to get dirt for constructing a road. After placing the top soil back, they asked me for my preference in species for reseeded.

Being an opportunist by nature, I asked them to seed in Kura clover as the legume portion of the mix. Kura clover is a legume that was brought into Canada a number of years ago coming from Russia. It's almost exactly like Red clover in growth and appearance except that it's known for its long lasting nature in a stand. We seeded the Kura clover back in 2004



which is 11 years ago.

To date the Kura has been picking up steam and gaining "market share" in the stand. Considering all the positive features that Red clover has, to gain the longevity aspect from Kura is simply tremendous. I've especially marveled at the growth in this paddock this spring. As you're obviously aware, it's been abnormally dry and the lack of rain has affected the growth on the pastures.

Well this Kura clover paddock has been growing strongly with very little set back this year compared to the other species in the other paddocks. The growth has been very rank and the color has been as rich a green as any other year. Check out the pictures I've included. To balance my enthusiasm for this specie for pasture production for either cattle or sheep it's important to point out a few disadvantages.

Firstly, Kura clover can cause bloat. If grazed as a sole specie in a young vegetative state, animals can bloat from it. To prevent this problem, my best tactic had been to seed it in a mixture with aggressive grasses. In my case, we mixed in Reed Canary Grass and Timothy. Both grasses

are very present in the mix to this date and have benefitted from the clovers ability to fix nitrogen. The color of the grasses is a deep green even without any fertilizer after the initial placement 11 years ago. The idea of the grass in the mix is that the animal dilutes the amount of legume with grass consumed to keep the amount of bloat-able material in the rumen at a safe level. The second tactic I use is that I purposely graze that paddock later than the others to give the clover time to flower. Once the plant is flowering, it has lost its soft, digestive nature which lowers its rate of digestion hence reducing the risk of bloat. As the cows are grazing the maturing grass and clover, they are also eating the hardening stem. This all dilutes off the softer bloat-able leaf material.

Secondly, with Kura being so aggressive in the stand, I don't know if it'll crowd out the grasses in time. In any biological situation, diversity is critical for long term stability. If the Kura clover crowds the grasses out, will the stand eventually



A dense stand of Kura clover

Photo by Ken Ziegler



Kura clover in the unique paddock

Photo by Ken Ziegler

How to measure SOIL Health

Field Workshop



Thursday, July 16, 2015 Holborn Hall AB.



9:00 am Classroom session at Holborn Hall
(51132 RR 13, Parkland County)
Followed by field workshop after lunch

What will be covered?

- What is soil health?
- Why is it important to the health of your agroecosystem?
- How can we benefit from the activities of the soil biota?
- Plant physiology and rooting
- Soil Respiration

Registration fee \$60 including lunch

Contact 780-727-4447

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Participants are encouraged to bring plants (with the roots, of course) and/or soils.

become a monoculture? I may not live long enough to see that happening but if the trend continues, it's a reasonable possibility. Considering the importance of grass in preventing bloat, this aggressiveness aspect could someday become a problem. Some day.

Thirdly, Kura clover is a tougher specie to establish. This is the least of my concerns but still exists. To my knowledge, Kura cannot be seeded into an existing stand either directly seeded or over seeded as well as the other clovers like Red, White or Alsike. That said, with the technology and skills available to seed in canola, if we apply that same level of exactness to Kura, we can be well assured of getting a good catch. With a bit of time following seeding, Kura can become an integral part of a pasture stand.

Lastly, Kura seed is expensive and hard to get. For Kura clover to be a viable option, it cannot be a short term crop. Other cheaper clovers fit better. Where Kura can shine is in the long term stands where the cost of establishment becomes incidental to the value of the specie over time. Should you choose to get Kura as a legume alternative, start engaging with your seed dealer months before seeding time to give time for sourcing and delivery.

So, I hope this little article has offered you a small glimpse into life on the Ruken Ranch and a peek into the life of one Director on the Board. As a Board, we continue to seek direction as to the issues in forage production and always invite your input or thoughts as to the next weakest link. Let us know what's weak on your farms and ranches and possibly we can help you make life better!

All the best, Ken.

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Kura clover zoomed in
Photo by Ken Ziegler

Forage & Grazing Points to Ponder

By Albert Kuipers,

Forage & Grazing Specialist



Reed Canary Grass Toxicity: Recently I received an email from my friend Barry Yaremicio at the Ag Info-Centre. He said he got a call from a producer who lost a calf and has another one in bad shape. Symptoms were mild scours and a dopey look with poor muscle control. Turns out they were eating reed canary grass at an early stage. The pasture they were in was drought stressed and had a wet area with lots of reed canary grass. Barry suggested it would be a good idea to let producers know about this.

With that in mind I thought I'd do a little research on the subject. As it turns out, reed canary grass has nine alkaloids contributing to the risk of sickness and loss of livestock. Cattle and sheep have been identified as the livestock most affected by this toxicity. Symptoms are diarrhea (scours), poor performance and a variety of neurological disorders including tremors and lack of coordination, collapse and even death.

The low palatability of reed canary grass usually keeps livestock from eating enough of it to cause harm. When more desirable forages are drought stressed and not growing, livestock will explore other options. If there are other forages like reed canary grass available, livestock may eat more of them than what's good for them. It's all about dosage. New growth tends to be more toxic than old growth.

Most reed canary grass growing in wet areas and ditches will have high levels of alkaloids in them. In the last twenty years or so, low alkaloid varieties have been developed and seed is readily available. If you have one or another of these varieties instead of an older or indigenous variety, you don't need to worry about toxicity issues, as the alkaloid levels in these newer varieties are low enough to keep the dosage well below levels of concern.

The appropriate grazing management of pastures with high populations of reed canary grass in them can reduce the animal's exposure to high levels of alkaloids. If the drought stressed pasture in paragraph one hadn't been grazed to the point where there was little else to eat but reed canary grass, the calves wouldn't have been exposed to high enough levels of alkaloids to do them harm. Also, if grazing durations are kept short enough to avoid grazing of new re-growth and recovery periods are long enough for reed canary grass to reach some level of maturity, grazing of toxic new growth reed canary grass would not happen. As well, the amount of other forages avail-

able for grazing will be high enough to dilute alkaloid exposure of livestock to levels of little or no concern.



Shared online photo—Reed Canary Grass

Burning Question of the Month:

At what age, or weight must calves with their mothers have water available to them?

We want your feedback!

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Drought Resilience



Photo by Amber Kenyon

It's looking like this might end up being a pretty hard summer for land managers. In our area, near Westlock, Alberta, we have seen very little precipitation. As you drive along our highways there's not a whole lot of grass to be seen. Some of the usually rough pastures are out of grass altogether, and a lot of the dugouts are looking like mud holes.

I know one of our favorite past times as farmers is complaining about the weather, but personally I only enjoy complaining when I can come up with a solution for the problem.

Is there a solution for a drought? We definitely cannot control precipitation, and we certainly cannot control the temperature, but the one thing that we can control is our management of the land. This is where intensive cell grazing comes into play. You can't plan for a drought while in the middle of one, in order to make your land drought resilient you need to plan for a drought years in advance.

Our land here at Greener Pastures is definitely not drought proof. No matter what shape your land is in, months without rain will affect your bottom line. That being said, our land is definitely drought resilient.

Even though everything in our area is incredibly dry, and the grass is barely growing, we are still planning to graze our animals until at least September. Our pastures don't have as much forage as usual, but we still have a lot of grass ahead of us and more than enough to feed our animals. Because we've left a lot of residue (not waste) in previous years, our thatch layer was thick enough to hold on to some of the little moisture that we received this spring. It also protected our soil from the heat spells that we've had in the last couple of months.

I've referred to the grazing concepts in previous articles and I figure this would be a great time to go further in depth with what exactly GRAS means, as these grazing concepts are what will save you a ton of money and time when the next drought comes along.

The first two acronyms in GRAS stand for Graze Period and Rest Period. These two concepts work with each other. Graze Period is how long your animals are on a piece of land. Ideally you only want to have your animals on one piece long enough to take no more than one bite of each plant. You want to put your animals there when the grass is in late stage two of growth. It will be well established but will not have had a chance to go to seed yet.

You then want to take them off of that piece before the animals had a chance to take a second bite off of any of the plants in the pasture. By getting off of the paddock early, you're doing a couple of things. You're leaving behind enough green matter that the plants are still actively collecting sunlight and you're also leaving behind enough residue so that there is no bare soil. That residue will provide insulation for the moisture currently in the soil and protection from the sun and wind.

As the plants die off in the fall and winter, this residue will turn into a protective thatch layer for the coming year. In order to understand the reasoning behind this concept, we need to understand a little more about the way that plants grow.

Seeds have a finite amount of energy stored inside of them, they use this energy to put out their first few leaves and roots. These new leaves are now responsible for collecting sunlight through the process of photosynthesis, which will continue to supply the energy that the plants will need to continue growing. These baby grass plants are in stage one of growth. If you put animals out on them at this stage, there is not enough energy yet stored in the roots to make a full recovery of the plant.

In early stage two of plant growth, the grasses have stabilized enough that they are collecting a fair amount of sunlight and are beginning to put out more leaves. As we see this above ground, the root systems are storing the energy gathered through the process of photosynthesis underground. They are also growing and becoming well established. Because we don't allow the animals to eat the entire plant, there is still enough green matter collecting sunlight to restore the plant to its previous state.

Once you've moved your animals off a specific piece of land, you now have to decide how long you want to give that a land a chance to rest, which brings us to 'Rest Period'. It's almost impossible to set one set amount of rest days for everyone.

Everyone's land is different, their climates are different and their soil is different. Even time of year can make a huge difference on how long you let a paddock rest for. If you watch your land, you'll know when it's time to put animals back onto a piece.

You want to wait until your pastures are back at that late stage two of growth. By giving your land a chance to revitalize itself in this way, your pastures will be collecting sunlight through photosynthesis at all times.

This usually means having quite a number of paddocks. Here at Greener Pastures we don't recommend having any less than 16. Most of our pastures have quite a few more than that. Because paddocks are made with the grazing concepts in mind, you can manage in this way on five acres or on 3300 acres.

This now brings us to Animal Impact and Stock Density, the other two grazing concepts that work hand in hand. While your animals are in a paddock, they're hooves, or feet depending on the animal, are working to step organic matter into the soil, whether it's manure or uneaten plants. By having the organic matter make contact with the soil the animals are quickening the speed in which the organic matter will decay and add to your soil base as opposed to weathering. They are also

Building Soil - Creating Land (Part 2!)

A Field Day with Dr. Christine Jones

July 23, 2015

Dr. Jones is returning to Alberta in July for a continuation of her very successful visit to Alberta last fall!

We will start off the day with a presentation on soil health basics and then will visit two different field sites where Christine will assess rooting depth, forage/pasture condition and soil microbes.



AGENDA (8:30 - 4:30)

*Meet at Olds College Visitor Parking Lot D at 8:30 AM
Come prepared for all weather*

Location 1: Sandy Loree's, Olds

Location 2: Graeme Finn's, Airdrie

\$30/per person or \$50/per farm unit

Price includes lunch and snacks, transportation, a great day of learning!

Please register by July 16 to Fiona McCarthy at (403) 335-3311 ext. 143 or fmccarthy@mvcounty.com



fertilizing the land as they move across it. In a healthy ecosystem this will allow for all kinds of soil life to move onto your land, as many beneficial bugs and beetles take up residence in animal waste.

Stock Density is how many animals you have in a paddock at a time. You'll want to have enough animals that you can adequately manage the grazing concepts. The idea is that throughout the time in a paddock the animals will provide even manure distribution and good animal impact on all parts of the paddock.

These two concepts are our best resources in which to manage 'weeds'. By using animal impact and good stock density we are able to ensure that the desirable plants in our pastures are able to have a fair playing field on the next rotation. When you put mineral or a salt block on a patch of undesirables, the animal impact in that area will knock down the undesirable plants and give some of the more desirable ones a chance to grow.

The grazing concepts are a fantastic tool that we can use to protect our pastures against the next

drought. Like any tool though, they can only benefit us if we actually use them. One of the joys of rotational grazing is that through innovations like portable electric fencing, fence testers and many different types of water systems, this process has never been easier or more affordable than it is now. There is no time better than today to start planning for tomorrow.

By Amber Kenyon



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Greener Pastures Ranching Ltd.

Presents:

**The Greener Pastures Walk
(aka Hay Ride)**



Our annual Pasture Walk will be held on July 11, 2015 on our ranch near Busby, Alberta. Don't miss out as we spend a day looking at everything grazing! We will look at the grazing concepts & principles, natural weed and gopher control, high legume grazing, fencing, cell design, water systems, bale grazing and so much more. A BBQ lunch will be provided. The cost will be \$75/person or \$50 with a group of 5 or more. Admission is free for kids under 16.

To register please contact Steve Kenyon

780-307-6500

skenyon@greenerpasturesranching.com

www.greenerpasturesranching.com

Fight Foot Rot From the Ground Up

The term “lame” is not uncommon in dairy and beef production. Even when an operation is thriving and the herd seems quite healthy, a case of lameness can appear and cause major economic setbacks to the business.

Lame cattle account for 70 percent of all sales of non-performing cattle. Lameness is most often attributed to foot rot, sole ulcers and white line disease. Foot rot, otherwise known as foul of the foot or sore foot, has been estimated to account for 75 percent of all lameness diagnosed in beef cattle.

Signs of foot rot include the holding or raising of a foot, acute swelling of tissues and swelling evenly distributed around the hairline of both hooves. Poor hoof health can lead to cows eating less due to the discomfort of standing and grazing. Problems with the hoof and walking will also affect both bull breeding ability and cow estrus detection for artificial insemination.

Over time, decreased feed intake can lead to decreased weight gains and decreased reproductive performance caused by increased calving intervals and services per conception. Lameness has also been associated with delaying ovarian cyclicity. Severe illness or death can occur in prolonged cases.

The main causative agent for foot rot is *Fusobacterium necrophorum*. An injury to the skin around the toes can allow bacteria to enter the body and cause foot rot. These injuries can be caused by rough surfaces, stones or gravel breaking the skin. Wet conditions aid the survival of *F. necrophorum*. Thus, higher incidences of poor hoof health can appear during times of the year when muddy or manure areas exist around feed, water and mineral feeders. This problematic setting can be found both in fields and also on concrete yards. Conditions around alleyways and gateways should also be considered.

Another seasonal contributor to hoof health problems and, in turn, lameness is heat stress. As cows pant and drool to keep cool, they can lose a lot of saliva, which means they lose some of their rumen buffer, contributing to acidosis. Rumen acidosis increases the risk for laminitis and poor hoof health.

Management techniques to prevent lameness involve keeping the environment as ideal as possible for the hoof. In confinement situations, reduce the length of time for cows standing in manure and on pasture, remove sharp gravel and reduce the accessibility to rough areas. Concrete can be abrasive for cows' hooves. Confinement on hard surfaces increases the weight load on feet, while housing on earthen surfaces reduces these effects. New and wet concrete is worse than dry and old concrete. Producers should allow their herd time to walk at their own pace and not “drive” them so they can follow an ideal path on their own.

Another management technique that should be considered is proper hoof trimming. Regular hoof trimming can help to prevent lameness due to overgrown claws, as well as promote proper loading and detection of lesions at an earlier stage.



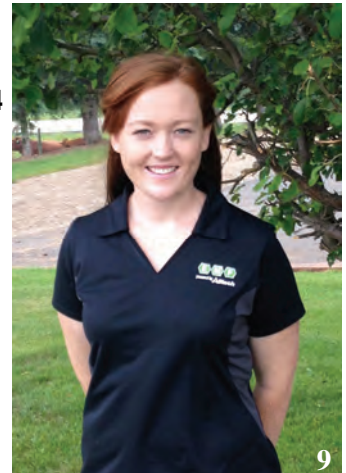
Footrot - online image courtesy of canadiancattlemen.ca

Nutrition can also affect lameness in regard to quality of horn growth and laminitis. Horn growth is influenced by trace minerals through their role in keratinization. Keratin, the fibrous protein substance that makes up hoof tissue, requires zinc to form the bonds that strengthen its structure for ‘harder’ hooves. Zinc is also important with skin integrity. Chelated zinc is more easily absorbed and retained, thus establishing adequate tissue reserves for the production and regeneration of keratin and supporting disease defense and reproductive function in today’s high producing animal.

As the price of feed continues to increase, keeping herds healthy becomes even more important to economic sustainability. Lameness, often attributed to foot rot, can create severe economic losses. However, there are many ways to prevent the disabling condition. By providing a safe environment and a proper diet, producers can avoid extreme cases and maintain healthy hooves in their herd.

EMF Nutrition powered by Alltech has a Seasonal Cow Program that is aimed directly at optimizing rumen efficiency and maintaining animal health as well as milk and meat quality, lameness and fertility issues.

To learn more about the program, contact:
Rebekah Ricketts at 403-741-9714
or:
rricketts@emf-nutrition.com



Producer Feature: Dr. Andrew Ritson-Bennett

Hello, my name is Andrew Ritson-Bennett and I am serving on the GWFA board for the first time. I first became involved with the GWFA three years ago while attending a multi-evening grazing workshop east of Innisfail with my wife Kristen. There we met forage specialist Albert Kuipers as well as past GWFA manager Jim Bauer and from that point on we have been participating in GWFA events whenever possible. My wife and I value the opportunities the association provides us to learn more about forages, pasture management and grazing.

As many of you know Kristen formerly served on the GWFA board. Last Christmas we had our first child, Liam Clancy, who is already learning loads about ruminant nutrition and grazing management seeing as how he gets to accompany Kristen to work, grazing workshops and field days.

I grew up on an acreage outside of Innisfail and attended Agricultural College in Saskatoon where I met Kristen. In 2010 I graduated from the Western College of Veterinary Medicine in Saskatoon and moved to Ponoka to practise mixed animal medicine. After two years there, Kristen and I moved back home to Innisfail where I have been practising ever since.

We are now into our third year with sheep, something neither of us would have ever imagined when we were in college, but here we are now. There may be some cattle in our future but we have not figured out how we will manage that yet. For now the sheep are keeping us plenty busy.

We raise a heritage breed called Black Welsh Mountain Sheep. We lamb in late May to June and raise the lambs through to finishing and direct market as a grass finished product. We have been working to market our wool with the ever increasing population of hand spinners and fiber artists as it is of very high quality, rare and unique.

As Kristen and I both have full time jobs, we feel this breed is great for us as they almost never have triplets and are known for their wide pelvis, lambing ease and mothering ability. The lambs are very thrifty, and it is rare for us to see a lamb born.

The hooves on the ewes and rams are virtually maintenance free. The tails do not require docking as they have no wool on the backside of the tail so they will not develop fly strike and they cannot be registered as purebred animals if their tails are docked.

We have a small army of Turkish Kangals to guard them and a white Border Collie to complement our black Sheep. Some stock dog people say sheep do not respect or visually identify a white dog, so we lucked out when we got a white dog to go with our black sheep! I always thought a good name would be Black Sheep-White Dog Ranch.

We currently are strip grazing our ewes and lambs on a 3 year old stand of alfalfa, timothy, fescue and brome. We have been looking into increasing the diversity in our pasture stand by introducing cicer milkvetch and sanfoin. As well, we have



Photos by Kristen Ritson-Bennett

The black spots in the grass are the sheep

been working with Kirk from Seaborn Seeds for a custom grass mix with white clover. This is our first year grazing this stand and we did not know how things would go having 50% alfalfa in the pasture.

Through proper grazing management we have evaded any bloat issues with the sheep thus far and the ewes and lambs look great. We have readily learned from our winter feeding that our sheep want nothing to do with mature timothy and now we have to deal with a fair amount of it in our pasture that is heading out. We plan to cut for hay whatever we do not graze. We However have concluded that we will not be using timothy in a pasture seed blend again.

We are cutting hay already and hardly have any alfalfa in bloom, but the great majority of the grass species have headed out. The dry weather has made things interesting. Although we do not have many animals to feed we have a drought plan in place if things continue on as they have been. Luckily in our spot we have got some decent rain in the last two weeks.

I am very enthused to be on the board and hope to contribute to the association in as many ways as possible. Also, I will be writing the occasional veterinary article for the Blade as time permits. If any GWFA members have any suggestions for topics, cattle or sheep, please feel free to email me to discuss them and I will be happy to see what I can do. Happy grazing!



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A Proven Method to Reduce Your Risk of Alien Attacks in Alberta

Now that I have your attention, let's talk about early weaning! Considering the dry summer we are encountering this year, cattle producers are looking for options when it comes to managing the beef herd. Many of my customers have said that they are looking at options such as selling cow/calf pairs, filling the bins with barley and pre-purchasing any hay they can get their hands on. It is great to be planning now for feed shortages, you will much farther ahead in the long run. Can you really end up with too much feed in the hay yard?

One of the options I have mentioned to some of my customers is the option of early weaning. Because of the potential of the lack of grass, producers run the risk of poor weaning weights and cows in poor body condition going into winter. Conception and maintaining pregnancy is the most important factor in cattle management, without a calf to sell in the fall, there is no income. Early weaning has been shown to be a possible solution for short term forage shortages as well as a management tool that can be used to improve reproductive success in thinner cows.

The cost of gain on beef cows and their calves is even more critical now in times of drought especially if producers are faced with purchasing all of the feed. Early weaning can be a management decision made to help alleviate this issue. The website foragebeef.ca has a number of fact sheets and research papers on this topic.

The research shows that with good nutritional management there is no effect on yearling weight, finished weight, or carcass qualities when calves are weaned at 120 days or more. In addition to that, these calves can be easily backgrounded on pasture and will have comparable 200 day weights compared to calves under normal conditions. It has also been shown that early weaning does not increase sickness or death in calves. There is additional evidence to show that there is no effect on age of puberty or reproductive ability in replacement heifers provided the heifers are on a balanced diets gaining at least 1.5lbs/head/day.

In addition to the evidence to show no effect on calf performance there are papers that show the early weaning can improve conception rates in thin cows by as much as 25%! It also reduces grazing pressure and pasture requirements by reducing dry matter intake. Protein and energy requirements are decreased by 30%. We are then able to give these girls the opportunity put on body condition prior to winter. The body condition improvement alone can reduce your winter feeding costs by \$50-\$100/head. I think they call this winning!

Now, what to do with the calves? It's pretty difficult to send them to auction when thinking about the potential calf cheque in the fall. There are two ways to think about this. Sell or background. The selling option is not a bad one. You have taken all risk away, and walk away with your revenue

for the year. Completely take out the risk of calf death to predators,



sickness, bloat, and aliens as well as the opportunity cost associated with poor weaning weights from pneumonia, pinkeye, foot-rot or alien/cult encounter related stress. Never mind the labour and money associated with everything mentioned. I personally am not a big fan of cults or alien encounters.

The other option is to background those calves. These early weaned critters are pretty resilient, and learn to eat rations fairly quickly. Francis L. Fluharty from Ohio State University Extension has an excellent summary on getting these little calves started. Getting started on feed is the most challenging part of freshly weaned calves. Not only are they stressed, they are completely changing the feed that they have been on.

Providing fresh water and high quality soft grass/legume hay initially is a good place to start. A minimum of 16-18% crude protein is important because of low intakes. Once they have reached normal weaning weight, 500+ lbs, the total ration protein level can be lowered to 14% on a dry matter basis.

Because of feed shortages this year it will be tempting to look at alternative feed ingredients. Many of those options will work just fine in the ration, but ensure that you have balanced the ration, minerals included. Talk to a nutritionist if you have any questions!

Changes in the diet need to be done slowly as to not upset the balance in the rumen causing metabolic diseases such as acidosis and bloat. Always ensure these calves have clean water, adequate bunk space, clean pens, and access to feed at all times. You've got this down? You are off to the races!

So with all of that being said, go get em! If you haven't already started on a drought plan, I suggest getting started on it. Make a plan, and if you need to make adjustments along the way do so. There is lots of resources out there, Grey Wooded Forage Association is a great place to start. If they don't know, they will send you in the right direction. The organisation's greatest assets are the relationships that have been built over the years. The GWFA community is engaged in regenerative agriculture production methods and promotes environmentally and economically sustainable forage and agricultural practices. As for the aliens, don't worry! They won't come near your place if you are managing your pastures!

By Kristen Ritson-Bennett,

Ruminant Nutritionist, 403-358-1674

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