

Conservation Corner for October 24, 2017

“You Don’t Win Friends Serving Salad”

Local beef farmers are taking steps to care for their animals and the environment

By Jodi Venema DeHate
Wexford Conservation District

Many people really enjoy a juicy, sizzling steak, or a well prepared burger with lots of flavor. Some would go so far as to say “you don’t win friends serving salad.” There has been a lot of buzz around lately questioning if beef production is harmful to the environment. Beef farmers in our area can and do take steps to be good stewards of their land and water. In this article, you’ll learn how beef is raised and what beef farmers are doing to help the environment and reduce their impact on it.

Feeding those muscle builders

When you think of a beef farm, thoughts turn to cows on a beautiful lush pasture. Those thoughts aren’t wrong, but it takes work on the farmer’s part to keep those animals well fed. Beef farmers usually want to send an animal to slaughter when it is 22 to 24 months of age. To achieve that goal, the animals need to gain about three pounds of weight a day. How do farmers make this happen? There are multiple strategies.

Calves stay with their mothers for four to six months and drink nutrient-dense milk to give them a great start. Once the calves are weaned, they’ll start eating what their mothers have been eating – quality forage. Forage is just a fancy term for a grass-based mixture that might include grasses, legumes (think alfalfa), and sometimes brassicas like turnips.

Many beef producers utilize what’s known as rotational grazing. This means that the pastures are divided up into sections known as paddocks. Cattle graze in one paddock at a time until it’s eaten up. Then they are moved to another section of the pasture to do the same thing. This allows the forage in each paddock to regrow undisturbed and become nutrient dense before the cattle are returned to it. The USDA-Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) can help producers come up with a good rotational grazing program that includes recommendations for placing fencing and water sources. In some instances, NRCS can also help share the cost of some of these practices.

Many farmers raise their beef cattle on a grass-based systems for most of the animal’s life. On these farms, it’s not until the last four to eight months of the animals’ lives that they are fed some grain to promote marbling. Marbling in the meat is what gives it that flavor that many people are looking for. Wade McNitt of Mesick raises Red Angus cattle. When his animals close to being fully grown, he feeds them a ration of 25% grain, with the remainder of the daily feed intake still comprised of forage.

A “grass fed only” heifer or steer does not get any grain. It also takes 6-8 months longer to raise a “grass fed only” beef animal because grain is much more nutrient dense than forages.

Winter management

Although cattle are fairly tolerant of cold temperatures, many beef farms do provide some sort of shelter or windbreak for their cattle. Their winter food is usually made up of baled hay, silage, and some grain. When animals are in a central feeding location manure can build up. Many farms will stack that manure in one spot until it can be spread on fields in the spring.

Some beef farms place round bales of hay in the pastures during the winter on top of the snow. By spreading out where the bales are placed, this spreads out the area in which the cattle feed, and thus results in the manure being spread out more uniformly on the pastures.

Another type of beef production system

Beef feedlots are another type of beef production system. What do those farms look like? Well, not unlike a dairy operation really. Some farms, like Fenner Farms in Boon, buy calves at 400 pounds from a “backgrounder” downstate. A “backgrounder” is someone that raises calves from the time they are babies until they are weaned.

Beef feedlots organize calves in age groups. Each age group is kept in a pen setting, and gets a slightly different ration to help them maximize their growth. Their rations are made up of a mixture of hay, corn silage, grain, and haylage.

In this system, manure management is a must. The manure is usually put into a manure pit or a stacking facility during the summer and winter months. Spring and fall is when most of the manure is spread on fields. By putting manure on the fields, farmers add valuable organic matter and nutrients back into soil where the crops are raised to feed the cattle.

Extending grazing season

Some farms that raise beef and their own corn or other grain will plant a cover crop that helps reduce soil erosion, and build up soil health. Certain types of cover crops can be grazed late into the fall.

Grazing cover crops has multiple advantages. It can extend the grazing season so that the stored feed isn't used until later in the winter. This helps the bottom line of the farm. The foot action of the cows also puts the plant matter into the ground helping build organic matter in the soil which can really help the next crop be more robust with less inputs like fertilizers. Manure is spread by the animal moving about the field and not by a manure spreader which again, helps save the farm money by not having to use equipment, fuel, and time to do that job.

Environmental Concerns

Our local beef producers are very conscious of the impact raising meat animals has on the environment. Using best management practices like rotational grazing, manure management, growing crops with the least amount of inputs, and cover crops all help them reduce negative impacts on the environment. If you are a farmer and would like to learn more about these practices, the Conservation District and USDA-NRCS staff are here to help!

Jodi Venema DeHate is the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program technician for Wexford, Missaukee, Kalkaska, and Crawford counties. If you would like to learn

more about how you can purchase local beef or implement conservation practices appropriate for beef farmers, you can contact her at the Missaukee Conservation District at (231) 839-7193 or jodi.dehate@macd.org.

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Did you know?

According to the Beef Industry Council, beef cattle are raised in 80 of Michigan's 83 counties on about 12,000 farms. Cash receipts from cattle and calves in Michigan total \$541 million. That's enough beef that our Michigan farmers are able to meet about 33% of our state's demand for steaks, roasts, and hamburgers.

All photos were taken by Jodi Venema DeHate



Wade McNitt of Mesick raises red angus cattle for beef. He and other farmers in our area strive to produce a quality product, make it available locally, and be good stewards of their soil and water. His cattle move between paddocks frequently in the summer as part of a technique to ensure that both the pasture and the cattle stay healthy.



Fenner Farms in Boon uses a feedlot system to raise cattle by age class. Manure is removed daily from their sheltered feedlot and stored until it can be safely spread on crop fields.