

## Winter Stockpiling Proves Successful for Va. Farmer – Lancaster Farming

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EDINBURG, Va. — First the bad news: Moving the temporary electric fencing that Jay Hafner used for strip grazing in his pasture made for a cold chore on some winter mornings. And if he wasn't careful with the reel, he found, the electric polywire could get badly tangled during the wind-up process.

Now the good news: It was probably worth it. Hafner's cattle spent the past two months grazing on extremely high-quality forage, sparing him much of the work and expense of feeding hay all winter, and his pasture now sits primed for vigorous spring growth.

“(Stockpiling) is definitely an underutilized tool,” said Hafner, speaking to about 20 people who came to an NRCS- and Extension-sponsored field day on his Jumping Run Farm in Edinburg. “I could do a lot more with this.”

In early December, soon after Hafner turned his cattle onto the 10-acre pasture where he'd stockpiled fescue during the fall, a similar event was held to promote the practice.

At the first field day, forage experts discussed the numerous theoretical benefits of stockpiling fescue for winter strip-grazing. At the recent follow-up field day, visitors had an opportunity to learn about Hafner's actual, day-to-day experiences over the past two months, and hear a detailed analysis of the actual forage quality in Hafner's pasture and other agronomic benefits of the management technique.

J.B. Daniel, an NRCS agronomist who has extensively promoted stockpiling and strip grazing in Virginia recently, told the gathered crowd the fescue in Hafner's pasture maintained excellent quality throughout the winter.

Through early February, tests showed crude protein levels above 14 percent and total digestible nutrients above 60 percent — to Hafner's surprise, better than his very best, high-quality hay.

While growth was limited last fall due to poor rainfall, Daniel estimated that the pasture contained about one ton of dry matter per acre. With better rain in the fall, Daniel added, that figure could have been twice as high.

Because Hafner allowed his cattle to graze the pasture in strips, the animals utilized a high proportion of the available forage, and spread manure and urine uniformly across the pasture.

Richard Fitzgerald, another NRCS agronomist who worked with Hafner on the stockpiling demonstration, estimated that over the course of the winter, the manure and urine added 53 pounds of nitrogen, 41 pounds of phosphorous and 55 pounds of potassium to the pasture. With that amount of fertilization, Fitzgerald said, the pasture should need little or no additional nutrients (depending on what use the pasture will be managed for) in the spring — representing another significant benefit of fescue stockpiling.

Other benefits discussed at the field day included the fact that spending so much time in the pastures while moving the fencing accustoms the cattle to humans, and allows a producer to assess the herd while getting in a good 20-minute workout.

Hafner began the stockpiling program on the 10-acre pasture late last summer, when he applied three tons of poultry litter per acre and then let it grow undisturbed.

On Dec. 6, he turned seven cows, eight heifers and a bull onto the pasture, and allowed them access to strips of pasture a day or two at a time. By the Feb. 13 field day, the cattle had grazed the pasture for 47 days, and still had a small amount left. Hafner brought the cattle off the pasture and fed them hay for about 20 days because of snow and ice.

After this year's successful experiment, he plans to expand his use of the technique in the future.

Daniel and his forage colleagues have emphasized at these events that stockpiling fescue for winter grazing management can be a very cost-effective option for farmers, although it requires appropriate stocking rates and enough available pasture to set aside for months at a time.