

Bale Grazing Gives Big Paybacks, Grows More Grass for Canada Ranch

Saving time and money, while growing more grass - these are the reasons Jonathan Bouw and his brother Stefan say they started bale grazing at Edie Creek Angus a little over five years ago. Located in rural Manitoba just 20 miles east of Winnipeg, the brothers' ranch is a multi-generational purebred Angus seedstock operation. A family affair, their parents and extended families are each involved in the ranch in varying ways.



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Over the years, the Bouws have consistently sought out creative strategies to reduce inputs and use their land more effectively. In the early 2000s, they converted the 1700-acre ranch from conventional to organic production. In time, the brothers also adopted holistic planned grazing to manage their pastures.



Combined with bale grazing, these alternative approaches have allowed Edie Creek Angus to successfully graze more animals, while also improving their land. Additionally, with little to no equipment and less time needed to get things done the family has saved much time and money.

"We don't have enough land to stockpile or swath graze," says Jonathan. "Bale grazing allows us to do the most we can with what we've got."

During their winter grazing season, which runs from early December through late May, the Bouws allot their 200-head purebred cowherd approximately 24 bales per grazing move. Bales are spaced approximately 30 feet apart across each acre.

"That's good for about 3 days of grazing during calving," notes Stefan. "When not calving we usually go 3-5 days between moves."



Grazing days are increased or decreased dependent on forage quality of the bales in each pod (i.e., group of bales). To better understand what they're working with and plan out their grazing strategy each year, the brothers take forage samples of hay bales in the fall. In addition, they observe manure piles when grazing to check for inconsistencies in diet.

"The ultimate forage test is the manure of the cows," says Jonathan. "You can see it changing and when it's too soft or too fibrous, you change your grazing accordingly."

For example, Stefan explains, when grazing poor quality bales, he moves cattle quicker leaving excess hay in the field to serve as fertilizer instead.

According to Bouw, thanks to bale grazing, their cattle are happier during the winter months and perform better. In addition, he says, the benefits to his pastures the following year are invaluable.

"We've seen up to three times the carrying capacity on land after it has been bale grazed in the same year," says Jonathan. "It creates an unbelievably dark green, lush jungle of healthy nutrient-dense grass and the cattle love it."

Along with the visible benefits, Stefan notes bale grazing also pays back financially. He estimates their operation saves nearly \$109/cow each winter by bale grazing instead of feeding hay in a conventional dry lot scenario. At 200-head, those savings add up to over \$20,000 annually.

Despite the overwhelming benefits, the brothers do admit there can also be some challenges along the way. Getting safely to cattle in deep snow can be difficult when wind creates deep snow drifts. Moreover, the freeze-thaw period in early spring can make grazing without simultaneously damaging pastures a hard task. They have learned to mitigate this last difficulty by



moving cattle to higher, drier ground during the early spring months.

When talking with potential first-time bale graziers, the Bouws offer up the following words of wisdom:

- Start small - During the first winter they tried bale grazing, Edie Creek Angus experimented with a shorter 3-month grazing period to learn the ropes.
- Watch the ground - Pay attention to how the land reacts post-bale grazing. Did it improve? If pasture quality declines, you may be stocking too heavy. Seek out more experienced bale graziers to learn what works and what doesn't.
- Keep fences hot- Winter weather can put a drain on electric fences. Employ a quality fence charger that can maintain a good voltage (10,000 volts) for grazing cells. Gallagher has [many high-quality fence options](#).



All in all, the Bouws say bale grazing has been a win-win strategy for their operation. The practice allows them as beef producers to make more money with fewer inputs. In turn, they get to spend more time on the things that really matter.

Visit Edie Creek Angus's [website](#) and follow them on Twitter ([@ediecreekangus](#)) to learn more about their operation. The brothers welcome producers to contact them with any questions related to bale grazing.

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