

Grazing Crop Residues with Beef Cattle

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Crop residue is an economically important feed source for cow-calf producers. While this resource is consistently used by producers in the Corn Belt, increased acres of sorghum in Oklahoma and Kansas this past year has provided additional grazing opportunities.

The main crop residues grazed are corn and sorghum and the nutritional value of the residue varies according to what crop was planted. Leaves of corn and sorghum are inferior to the value of the grain, but the husk, cob (corn), and stalk have less value than the leaves. Sorghum leaves are slightly higher in protein than corn leaves and often there is more volume of residue in a sorghum field compared to corn.

Cattle stocked on crop residues will selectively graze, consuming the most nutritious components (grain and leaves) within the first 45 days. Later in the grazing season, fewer nutritious components of the residue will be available and consumption will be limited to stalks.

Corn and sorghum residues sufficiently meet the needs of dry cows in mid-late gestation. As cows move through the production cycle, nutrient requirements increase, especially during early lactation. Due to increased nutritional need, the body condition of lactating cows and gestating heifers should be closely monitored if grazing crop residues.

While there is grain in the field, animals in most production phases will be receiving adequate nutrients. The best way to gauge the level of grain consumption in crop residue is to monitor how much grain is found in the manure pats. When little grain can be seen in the manure, much of it has likely been consumed and protein supplementation may be required to maintain cow body condition.

Weather is the most important factor in grazing crop residues. Access to the residue can be limited due to snow cover and rain will accelerate the breakdown of the forage itself. Natural weathering through the winter season will reduce its nutritional value. For this reason, it is best to stock residues intensely after harvest. In Oklahoma, this can be worked into the current winter grazing system by grazing crop residues in mid-late fall just before small grain pastures are ready.

If grazing sorghum residue, it is recommended to postpone grazing until 7 days after the first hard freeze. Sorghum residue is often green after harvest and ideal crop conditions can cause 'suckering'. This regrowth has been known to be high in prussic acid which can lead to prussic acid poisoning.

Dryland crop residues will have the carrying capacity to stock 1,000 pounds of cow on one acre for 30 days. This means that a producer who owns 1,300 pound cows can stock one cow on 1.3 acres. On a larger picture, 80 acres of sorghum stubble will provide 60 cows with one month of grazing or 30 cows with two months of grazing. For more information about grazing crop residues and appropriate stocking rates, contact your local county extension office.

I would like to invite you to attend the new monthly seminar, '**Cattle Sense**'. Meetings are held the second Wednesday of each month at 7:30 AM at the Northwest Stockyards 5 miles west of Enid on US 412. **Cattle Sense** is a program highlighting timely topics faced by beef cattle producers and is sponsored by the Garfield County OSU Cooperative Extension Service. This month, **Cattle Sense** will be held on December 9th and there will be an OSU veterinarian to speak about calf health. We hope to see you there!