

Lock ‘Em Up by Julie A. Best, Public Affairs Specialist, and Eddie Jolley, Conservation Agronomist, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Auburn, AL

According to Sonny Caley, cattle producer in Dallas County, Alabama, and Mike Davis, Regional Extension Agronomist at the Black Belt Regional Research and Extension Center at Marion Junction, Alabama, expensive technology, equipment, or chemicals are not needed to improve forage health. Grazing management is the key to forage health.

Mr. Caley has been grazing cattle all his life. For many years, he operated a dairy. When he got out of the dairy business, beef cattle seemed to be the natural progression. According to Mr. Caley, “The cattle business is not a business; it’s a disease. It gets into your blood.” Mr. Caley just likes to work with cattle.



(L-R) Mike Davis, Alabama Cooperative Extension System; Sonny Caley, Dallas County cattle producer; and Doug Gresham, District Conservationist, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, look at the cattle and the cell grazing management system.

In 1998, Mr. Caley started working with Davis to establish a series of paddocks for cell grazing. “I believe in letting the cow go get the grass. That takes a lot of expense and turmoil out of cattle farming,” says Caley.

Cell grazing is a management method that can improve the health of the forage. Applied properly, it can help minimize overhead costs, improve gross margin (by minimizing feed costs and maintaining high levels of animal performance), and maximize the pounds per acre. “It’s a concept that anyone can adjust to their own situation,” says Caley. “Cell grazing is a great

concept,” says Davis, “providing we get an adequate growing season. We can’t control the weather; we can have a season that is too wet or too dry to produce the needed forage.”

In the fall of 1998, Mr. Caley planted a mixture of fungus free fescue and clover in the cells. In the fall of 1999, stocker steers and heifers were turned into the cells. “We used a put and take system,” said Davis. Mr. Caley had another group of steers that he held in a separate location, and as the forage would support more cattle, they were added to the cell. “We didn’t



Cell grazing utilizes the available forage. Pounds per acre is the concept with cell grazing.

add cattle until we knew we could put them there and leave them,” said Davis.

Early in the year, there were 20 cattle on 20 acres. As the forage increased, cattle were added to total 30 cattle on 20 acres. The cattle were weighed when they went into the cell in October, and

again when they were sold in May. The cattle were in the cell for 189 days. The stocking rate equated to 23.45 stockers on 20 acres with a total weight gain of 9741 pounds, which equates to 487 pounds per acre.

Davis explained that cattle have the ability to make up gain that they didn’t get earlier in their life. This characteristic is called compensatory gain. Cell grazing utilizes that characteristic. The cattle are kept at a maintenance level in the fall when the forage is less productive. “You don’t try to maximize their production in the fall because you save that forage for the winter when you would ordinarily be feeding hay,” says Davis. “Then in the spring when

you have a lot of lush growth, you let them have all they want and they make up the weight gain then.” “How many pounds per acre is the concept with cell grazing, not how many pounds per day you put on the steer or cow. That’s the bottom line. You get more pounds per acre which enables you to compete with the row crop, poultry, or even catfish business,” says Caley.

Management is the key in cell grazing. In cell grazing, it is necessary to adjust the recovery periods as pasture growth rates change. “In the fall it’s not so critical,” says Davis. “You want to graze all the forage because there will not be any regrowth until spring. In the spring, the growth cycle for forage is about 21 days. You need to watch the forage and move the cattle so that each cell will have adequate time to recover before the cattle are turned in again.” Recovery periods are shorter when the forage is not over grazed. Proper grazing management protects the below ground roots. In turn, the above ground vegetation responds quicker. There are no fixed answers. Every season differs.

“Cell grazing is a concept that the small cattleman can use,” says Caley. “Some folks complain that the cattle business is just for the big operation. It’s not; the small cattleman can use cell grazing, and when used properly, it will work.”

Mr. Caley’s philosophy is: if you are going to farm, you need to love it. It’s obvious that Sonny Caley enjoys working with his cattle and taking care of his natural resources. “One of the best advantages of the forage cells is the clear water that runs off the fields. It does me good to ride down through my farm after a big rain and see the water run clear.” Good water quality is a product of proper grazing management.

Clean water runoff, adequate forage, and a margin of profit—cell grazing seems to have it all. For more information about cell grazing for forage management, contact your local USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service office.

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Sonny Caley and Doug Gresham, District Conservationist, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, check the power source for the cell paddock.



A water line and a movable water trough provide water for the cattle in the cells.



Cattle thrive in the cell paddock. Pounds per acre is the concept with cell grazing.