I’m glad the days are starting to be a fraction longer, even though it’s not much more yet. While I wait for some daylight, I can usually be found reading early in the morning. I’m certainly a morning person, just ask my wife. There is no other good reason to be up at 4 A.M. this time of year, especially if I don’t have to be. I am though, trying to catch up on reading while it’s a bit easier to stay inside.

There is always something to be learned, reviewed, or perhaps occasionally unlearned. I like to take a second look at old ways of doing things and reading very old agriculture books. You would be surprised to learn that things that most would think are new ideas are sometimes over a century old.

As new ideas or innovations come to light, there is always somewhat of an incentive to evaluate and try them. Quite often they came about because of some new technology or product availability. Fads come and go, but the ideas that make the most sense and make a positive impact on the bottom line keep coming back and stay around until the next short-lived fad displaces them for a while.

In a depressed market, input costs will make the difference of using black or red ink. It’s usually not the time to do anything that will raise the cost of production. It’s usually a smart idea to try and keep production costs as low as possible even on good years. If you can make money on low years, then you have even a greater chance of making really good money on good years. A relative used to tell me not to get caught up in the game, but stick to what works year end, year out. There is a lot of truth in that statement.

Letting the livestock feed themselves and having enough acres available to supply that forage is a good place to start. Rarely, can you feed livestock cheaper than they can. The less grazable forage you have available, the more fed feed that will be needed. All fed feed is input costs. You control these costs. Instead of baling more hay or buying hay or feed, are there more acres that can be grazed? Do you have some cropland, especially marginal cropland, that might be better off in forages?

Long rotations used to be the norm. Fields might be rotated from corn, to soybeans, to wheat. The wheat would often have perennial forages seeded with it, especially timothy, and then frost seeded with red clover. After the wheat harvest, a late season clipping was usually taken for cow hay, the next year was just hay or hay then grazing before going back to corn again. Four fields rotated this way would always insure a harvest of each crop every year. This diversity was not only good for the soil, but it didn’t put all the eggs in one basket either.

I tend to sit back and think hard about the year that we just left behind and do my best to develop a good plan for the year we are about to tackle. I spent too much in 2019. I know I did. But I also believe in being prepared and the memory of last winter and spring is still too fresh on the mind. I spent money on new winter-feeding pads and more waterers; money well spent so far. I try and remain optimistic, especially with the livestock markets, and I do believe that they will cycle back up. Some would say that this might be a good time to expand; I would tend to agree. That could pay dividends if the market becomes bullish again.

Whether you are grazing stockpiled forages, feeding hay or other feed, some winter days are more challenging than others for both the producer and the livestock. I’m not complaining about the milder days we have been having, but there is a lot of winter to get through yet. I’m sure that we will get our share of snow and wintry weather. It always surprises me how snow is usually no issue for most grazing livestock. If the quality of the
stockpiled forage is good, then they will go after it…even if hay is provided. The quality of good stockpiled forage can easily be better than hay.

Ice, or enough ice to prevent grazing, is probably the number one reason to pull up stakes and move to some hay or other feed. Deep snow is next. How deep is too deep? That depends on two things: the livestock grazing it and the amount of forage present. Experienced animals, those that have done it before, won’t even hesitate; they know where dinner is and go after the good stuff. If you watch the younger, less experienced animals, they tend to eat first where others have been eating and then they soon figure it all out. Smaller ruminants, especially sheep, tend to have less issue with snow and are quite good at digging it out with their hooves. I’ve observed deer doing the same thing; they also are quite good in digging up turnip bulbs out of frozen ground and have been hitting some of mine quite hard. The amount of forage present becomes more critical as the amount of snow increases; the more forage present, the easier it is to get.

The quality of that stockpiled forage must be good. Energy, if anything, is usually the shortfall with protein second if too much mature forage is included. Energy can be a challenge. Growing and lactating animals may need supplementation. Winter annuals that are left will do a better job of maintaining enough energy and protein for those animals needing more as long as they last or can even be grazed depending on soil conditions.

Most producers are feeding hay or other feed by this time of year and there is certainly nothing wrong with that. There are, on the other hand, producers that want to reduce the amount of fed products and would rather move temporary fences than get a tractor out. I’m running out of stockpiled forage and will soon move to hay. I really needed those late summer rains that I didn’t get. That shortfall impacts grazing now.

Permanent winter-feeding areas should ideally be in an area with some wind break, a good winter watering source, on a well-drained soil/site, and where runoff and manure/waste feed can be managed. This means away from water bodies or with adequate buffers and usually with rock or concrete pads to feed on. Mud, along with wet cold weather, really increases energy needs. Muddy, stressful conditions should be avoided when possible. Feeding on rock padded areas or grazing sufficiently heavy stands of stockpiled forage usually are adequate.

We are just weeks away from Indiana’s two grazing conferences. Both conferences will have outstanding speakers and I would strongly encourage you to attend either or both. The planning committees have worked hard to get remarkable presenters and keep the costs low. Each conference has its own agenda with different speakers so there will be no duplication if you can attend more than one.

Happy New Year and keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

Northern Indiana Grazing Conference (NIGC) – February 7-8, 2020, Michiana Event Center 4405 E Farver St., Shipshewana, IN. For more information about the NIGC or to get a registration form, please call the LaGrange County Soil & Water Conservation District office at 260-463-3471 extension 3. John Kempf will be the keynote speaker on Saturday.

Southern Indiana Grazing Conference (SIGC) – March 4, 2020, Crane, IN – Speakers include Troy Bishop “The Grass Whisperer,” Greg Brann, and Seven Sons. For more information contact the Daviess County Soil and Water Conservation office at 812-254-4780, Ext 3, email Megan Fredrick at megan.frederick@daviess.org or visit http://www.daviesscoswcd.org/index.php/sigc or https://www.facebook.com/SouthernIndianaGrazingConference

More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/in/technical/landuse/pasture/