It’s true, you can graze in winter

By KEVIN DIETZEL

WINTER grazing can save a lot of money in feed costs, but it can be challenging. Top challenges identified by four graziers interviewed were wetting the livestock during freezing weather, getting consistent forage quality, managing the fencing on frozen ground, and contending with snow, ice and mud.

Following are profiles of four winter graziers in Iowa, and how they do it.

Tom McDermott, eastern Iowa

Tom McDermott is building up a cow-calf operation on his family’s farm near Sabula. He buys all of his hay, so he wants to graze as many days of the year as he can.

In the two years he has been raising cattle, he has increased stockpiled pasture by increasing the pasture resting time. In 2009, he moved the herd every four days and had around 40 days of rest between grazings. In 2010 he moved the herd every day or two, and had about 60 days of rest. As of this writing, he had enough grass left to graze through most of December.

He rotates paddocks once a day in order to have more consistent forage quality, but with snow cover they’ll leave the animals in one paddock for about a week.

When he runs out of pasture, McDermott feeds hay right on the pasture, moving the bale feeder with each new bale. This spreads out the manure nutrients more evenly. He figures there are $40 worth of nutrients in each bale, so at $50 a bale, he is only paying $10 a bale for feed and the rest is fertilizer cost.

The Wilsons, northwest Iowa

Torry and Erin Wilson graze dairy cattle, beef cattle and sheep into early winter on their farm at Paulina. They have long rest periods (60-plus days), so the stockpile is simply “ahead” of them in the rotation. They rotate paddocks once a day in order to have more consistent forage quality, but with snow cover they’ll leave the animals in one paddock for about a week.

When feeding hay, the Wilsons unroll round bales in the field to distribute the nutrients better. During muddy times, they feed in a feedlot until the ground freezes or dries up. Torry says the animals can walk farther for water in the winter than the summer.

Ryan Herman, northeast Iowa

Ryan Herman, who grazes beef cattle in New Albion, says of winter grazing, “I would love to not feed hay in winter, but I now think realistically in northeast Iowa I would be happy with feeding for just two months of the year.” He says forage quality is of concern on winter pastures. Monitoring the cows’ body condition, weight gain in yearlings and rumen fill, and monitoring manure to make sure it is spread out evenly on the pasture are essential.

One of the best ways to use annuals is to graze them during midsummer or fall in order to stockpile the perennial pastures that maintain quality better. Herman says sorghum sudan and brassicas are great quality forages, but lose quality very quickly after a freeze.

If the sward is dense enough, getting fence posts in the ground is not usually a problem. If the ground is frozen, he pounds a steel rod in the ground to make a hole, and then puts in the post. He often puts in the posts before the ground freezes.

Herman wateres his cattle in the winter with frost-free waterers, a stream or an artesian well. He says cattle will dig through ice and snow, you have to be very careful that they are getting enough to eat. If the weather is too cold and windy, or if pastures are too soft, he feeds in a cement yard that has shelter; otherwise, he feeds hay on pasture.

Bruce Carney, central Iowa

Farming near Maxwell, Bruce Carney grazes cornstalks and stockpiled pastures, which he starts in late July. His preferred stockpile forage is fescue, but he does not have fescue in all pastures, and tries not to stockpile the same pastures every year.

This farmer has grazed oats and turnsips until December and has grazed standing corn. For fencing, Carney prefers to set out paddocks in the fall but has used a drill with a masonry bit to make holes for posts in frozen ground, or he has stuck posts in snow drifts or in a cornstalk where the stalk is anchored in the ground.

Virgil Knobloch, southeast Iowa

Virgil Knobloch raises 100% grass-fed organic beef near Bloomfield and has had to feed hay a mere 13 days the past four winters. He stockpiles mostly fescue, planning the stockpile pasture areas around winter waterers.

He starts stockpiling from July 15 to Aug. 15, and the fescue that is grazed maintains quality until mid-March. He grazes closer in winter than in summer. He says the cows can graze with a maximum of 12 inches of snow cover. When he grazes tur-noips, he plants them in July and grazes in September, October and November, and also plants oats or wheat for extra fiber. When pastures are muddy, he says, “Keep ‘em movin’!”

Dietzel is the grazing coordinator for Practical Farmers of Iowa.