

## NORTHERN PRAIRIE GRASS HOME COMPANION

Greetings from snowy Minnesota where all the grass-finished cattle really are above average. And that's not just in Lake Wobegone either. During the 2007-2008 winter we have seen the majority of ranchers who produce cattle for us at Thousand Hills Cattle Co. ([www.thousandhillscattleco.com](http://www.thousandhillscattleco.com)) consistently hit their winter Average Daily Gain (ADG) goals. This is pretty amazing given that this was one of the roughest winters in a long, long time. Prior to this, we've had two bare winters along with three very dry, almost droughty years and then, depending on where in the Upper Midwest, 80-120 inches of snow this year.

You might wonder how we know we are getting the gains we need throughout the year, and it's because of one thing, we try to get every ranch to install their own cattle scale and weigh everything at least every 90 days. It was rather embarrassing when we first starting getting regular weights because of some of the serious gaps we discovered in our gains. We found out how important forage management can be during our hot spell in August and September, and then again during the snow-covered months, especially January and February.

Success comes from a combination of what one might call "old wisdom" and then the application of "new-fangled" ideas. The 100% grass-fed beef we enjoy so much is perhaps better now than ever before, and I'm not even sure that very much beef of our quality existed back in the "good ol' days". We are capable of year-round ADGs of 2 pounds a day, so that we can reach the finished animal in 16 to 22 months thus insuring a tender and delicious steak.

## OLD WISDOM

Every Boy Scout knows the most important thing is to "Be Prepared" which is the very purpose of the merit badges. It's impossible to have profitable and happy winters on a consistent basis without getting our "grassman merit badges" which means spending a good part of the warm months preparing for winter. When I talk to our top notch producers, this is what I hear over and over..."I make weight gain in the winter because the stored forages I make in the summer are high quality". We are not talking quantity alone, we are talking about brix indexes of at least 10-12% and adequate protein, minerals and palatability. When buying hay, even of marginal quality, with a price tag of \$160/ton or more there is a tendency to scrimp on quantity as well but there is always a price for that practice.

Our best producers know that there is no shortcut to avoid fixing the soil. Just do it. Model producer KARL DALLEFELD of Blue Mounds, WI (e-mail [karld@MWCI.net](mailto:karld@MWCI.net)) is a classic example. Karl is a forage specialist and consultant for Midwest Bio-Ag and, in addition, a producer of some of the best grass-fed beef anywhere. Money wisely spent "fixing the soil" is Karl's #1 bit of advice. He doesn't spend crazy money for things but he spends enough to get the soil working. This gives him the winter forages he needed this year to survive a terrible winter. Like everyone, we love Karl's beef and he has the

numbers to back it up. He is tracking his CLA levels, Omega 3 fat levels and now finds his meat higher in calcium, phosphorus, silica and strontium than any meat you can find. Some of his pastures are in their 7th year of rebuilding, that's when the rewards really begin to build. Karl recently added new ground to his acreage so even before the livestock arrived he started with soil tests and then some good lime and remineralization. Within the first year, results began show up in the hay and pasture. Karl supplements with kelp, Char-Cal (from MBA), a Gearld Fry-style mineral mix, a bit of dried molasses (more about that later) and the direct-fed microbials from Bio-Vet. He has some winter rye that he grazed twice last fall and will use again as soon as the snow melts. He's a big fan of sorghum sudan and hybrid sudan as well as grazing corn before it tassels.

## EVEN OLDER SCHOOL

If you want to find out how Nature does winter, watch North America's premier ruminant and learn essential lessons. I went to NORTHSTAR BISON ([www.northstarbison.com](http://www.northstarbison.com)) near Rice Lake, WI where LEE GRASE allows his bison herd to go back to their roots, so to speak. Bison work best at 13% protein so a good grass hay is perfect. Too much alfalfa and they "shut down" according to Lee. He says they get liver toxic on too "hot" a ration although he is moving towards a bit more alfalfa in the ration as his stands of red and white clovers have been getting wiped out lately particularly from the open winters. Where he shines is in keeping the beasts grazing virtually year-round with very little supplemental forage. Last year was one of the best and he only supplemented for 45 days the whole year. Bison can penetrate thigh-deep snow to access grass and they don't need liquid water if there is snow. Lee says making it "too easy for them" is actually counter-productive, that is, foraging bison are stronger, tougher and, as a result, more productive. Apparently bison are the only beasts known to be able to remain in a positive weight gain state at -20 degrees. In case you didn't know, over 90% of all the bison in the US are GRAIN finished, so it helps us grass-finishers to let people know that little tidbit when they ask if your beef is as good as buffalo. As we all know, putting bison on grain is almost criminal.

## THINK SMALL, GET BIG RESULTS

NEIL EFFERTZ of the EZ Ranch north of Bismarck, ND ([www.loala.com](http://www.loala.com)) is in the business of helping grass men old and new discover Lowline Angus cattle. He is also farming the kind of land that has broken the back of many a strong immigrant who refused to listen to the rules of nature, the rules of the northland prairie. This was an interesting year for their grazing program in that the Red River Valley area had a lot of spring and summer rainfall in the midst of a general drouth so they had grass growing out of control all summer long. This has given them the kind of grass they need for winter foraging. A couple of 50 degree days knocked the snow depth down so that the herd was grazing again mid-winter. When the snow doesn't allow grazing, he uses his bale processor to roll out a 1000# bale of barley straw and then a 1600# bale of alfalfa hay over it. This is enough, along with grazing the dry forage to fill up 200 head of cattle.

Neil uses molasses tubs for his yearlings that need to be slicked up for the summer sale but the cow herd have been fine without it.

The Effertz Lowlines average 1-1.5 higher body scores than standard Angus on the same protocol because of over 70 years of breeding for grass genetics in Australia. Turns out they make excellent foragers particularly on the dry grasses, they are winter hardy and pop out easy calves. Lowline calves have so much vigor Neil busted his rotator cuff trying to hold on to one to tag it. Neil shows ranchers in the Upper Midwest how to make money. Here's some math Allan Nation would like: If you let Neil help you swap out your herd of 1000 cows weighing 1400#, for 1400 Lowlines averaging 1000# (did you follow that?), you will notice that you now have 400 MORE calves each year, and you will do this on the same forage. That's an EXTRA profit of \$219,000 a year.

#### AND THEN SOME NEWFANGLED ADVICE

As we said, the top producers that have fat cattle that can finish on time, and the producers who can wean at 10 months and still have slicked up cows, know how to prepare. They do this by working hard on their soils and their forages to maintain HIGH BRIX% in all their forages. There is only one way to do that and it always starts with the soil. Knowing what to plant, how hard to graze, when to move and all those other factors are required. Foliar feeding is a valuable tool all summer long. One of the best consultants for achieving high brix forages is DOUG GUNNINK of Gaylord, MN ([www.grassfedisbest.com](http://www.grassfedisbest.com)). You will recognize him at meetings by his cheerful cap bearing the greeting "Got Grass?" (I don't know how he makes it through airports wearing that one!) Most of the good producers I know up here work with Doug and take advantage of his methods. Again, if you want to have a good winter, prepare all summer long. Doug uses the stockpiling technique, he loves sorghum-sudan, and teaches us Northerners how to graze annual cereal grasses. He sells seed and basic inputs for organic production.

One of Doug's latest tools is the improved molasses lick tub. His avoid some of the cheap protein sources but do have enough protein to boost the anemic protein levels of some of the warm season grasses, which can drop as low as 7%. He's now got a tub that will soon be certified organic and it should be available by early summer.

Our protocol at Thousand Hills allows the feeding of flax and Doug finds that feeding up to 1/2# of grown flax meal a day will keep ADGs going. Flax, however has become scarce around here and the price has shot up. We don't allow the use of linseed meal as it affects our Omega 3:6 ratios and isn't as holistic for the rumen. The same is so for all the piles of distiller's grains that are available in the northland. However, for producers that allow it, particularly some of the dairies, Doug has been able to weave it into some of his dairy rations. He is also using some of the new humate products that are available, notably the Mesa Verde humates from New Mexico and, if it works for your particular program, he can tell you what you can gain by using it.

The producers that have consistent winter gains and that have well-finished and healthy cattle follow the wisdom of nature. They buy the best cattle they can afford, they fix their soils to the best of their ability and they follow the advice from the grass professionals. We want to buy cattle from this kind of producer. The one who can maintain weight gains all winter long. And, ultimately, this is the kind of grass-finished beef we like to eat. Tender, delicious and all natural.

Get a set of 6 DVDs showing DOUG GUNNINK, GEARLD FRY, WILL WINTER, DAN COUGHLIN and TODD CHURCHILL teaching the basics as well as the secrets of profitable grass-finishing for \$195 from [www.thousandhillscattleco.com](http://www.thousandhillscattleco.com) or 507-263-4001.

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William G. Winter, DVM is a free-lance journalist and teacher. He is primarily interested in awakening the world to the human health benefits and the environmental bonus that comes from raising 100% grass-fed livestock using sustainable practices and the magic of holistic herd health. He is also the herd health consultant for producers of livestock for Thousand Hills Cattle Company and lives in Minnesota where the grass grows green and lush, and all the producers children eat right and are therefore above average. Contact him with your concerns, grand concepts, and rave compliments at [holistic@visi.com](mailto:holistic@visi.com) or [www.willwinter.com](http://www.willwinter.com).