We are quickly getting the crops out of the field. This has been one of the most open and quickest harvest season I have seen in many years. If it weren’t for the chance of fire because of the dryness we are experiencing it would be a perfect harvest – other than some lower dryland yields and of course prices. Speaking of prices, many people in the beef industry will tell you that cattle prices are getting soft and that means there won’t be the margin in the cow/calf sector as there has been the last couple of years. To keep costs down and try to keep afloat our cattlemen must look at some ways to save some money at least on feed. With harvest we have a huge opportunity to offset these declines in both sectors – crop and cattle.

Stalk fields properly grazed after harvest provide low-cost feed for cow herds. You are seeing fences being put up and cattle turned out into stalks every day with the advancement of harvest. Harvested corn, soybean and milo fields make a great opportunity for grazing after a lack luster three months of growth in our pastures. So there is definitely a benefit for the cows and of course for the cattlemen. It should be pointed out here that it is just not livestock producers but for crop farmers. There are benefits from grazing and not the potential harm that many fear. Crop farmers could profit from better use of stalk fields in more ways than financially. Let’s look at some benefits of grazing stalks for livestock and crops.

Years ago, stalk fields offered lots of dropped ears. With stronger stalks and better combines, little corn is left in the fields, so some farmers think there are not positives about having their fields grazed in the fall. Let’s start with blow-down corn fields or stalk rot, which was rampant this year. In cases of storm or stalk rot dropped ears, there’s real benefit in grazing. Cows reduce volunteer corn the next year. One must also consider the benefit of reduced residue when you go to planting next year, especially on no-till fields. You will also find the soil warms up a little quicker the following year. One thing that is often overlooked is the benefit that comes from the recycled residue that comes out as waste from the cow which contains many types of minerals and particularly the readily available nitrogen that the cow produces in that way. With the downward shift in corn prices, extracting added value from cornfields offers a huge benefit that should not be overlooked. In the era of general farms with a combination of cow herds and crops, stalk grazing was common. That has gone by the wayside unfortunately but there is potential for beef farmer and crop farmer cooperation on grazing.

There are several advantages for cattle using stalk fields. A combination of cornfields and fall pasture can carry a cow herd a long time without feeding a bale of hay in an open winter, but many in our area don’t have the luxury of pastures that haven’t been grazed yet so the corn stalks are a blessing. However we must note that grazing must be done in about three months. Corn fields might carry cows until about Christmas. Going much after that becomes doubtful. That makes it important that you turn in cows soon after harvest. Corn forage starts going downhill in quality rather quickly, especially with any fall moisture. There’s an added grazing benefit in many cornfields that we probably don’t think about --grass field edges and waterways. Cows enjoy the treat of those green growing areas or even as dry grass. And the grass gains from annual grazing so don’t fence those areas off. They also make a great lounging area for resting after grazing.

The most often used argument that I have heard over the years from farmers is that they fear tramp damage to their soil from herds. That seems most prevalent with those that minimum or no-till their fields. When I asked them about that, they indicated that their crop consultants and seed corn dealers have told them that, and in some cases they have seen it with their own eyes. There are of course those that feel they have to disk under their stalks as soon as harvest is over. I have never understood that practice, if nothing more than to leave snow catching elements for their fields. At any rate many corn farmers have not utilized cattle on their crop residue, mostly because of the fear of losing bushels to the acre the following year. However the University of Nebraska has many studies that repeatedly show there is no yield decrease in corn or soybeans the next year after grazing and in fact some increase, especially in the case of soybeans. Of course there must be some common sense management. If big rains come to soften fields, take the cows off. Move them to a sodded paddock. It is better to sacrifice a grass area instead of a crop field. You won’t win any favors if you leave cattle out on soggy fields.

I know that a lot of people are not sure what these stalks are worth either to them as cattlemen or as crop farmers. There is some help out there outside of your local coffee shop. A University of Nebraska-Lincoln spreadsheet allows farmers and ranchers to make better informed decisions about cattle grazing corn stalks. An Excel spreadsheet, titled “The Corn Stalk Grazing Calculator”, can be accessed at http://extension.unl.edu/statewide/westcentral/agecon3. The spreadsheet estimates the number of animals that can be supported on a given field of corn stalks with a specified yield, and also has an economic evaluation including the cost to transport the livestock and check their care and conditions plus several other factors.

Another possible use is to help cattle owners evaluate the feasibility of grazing their cattle on corn stalks at various distances from their primary production center. The two most common ways to price corn stalks used for grazing is on a per head per day and per acre basis. Rates can vary based on variations in lease terms and forage potential. In some cases, fences are built and maintained by the landowner, while in other cases the cattle owner provides the fences. The same is true with watering equipment. This tool can help you come to an agreement on rental rates that are fair to both parties. I see advantages to both cattlemen and corn farmers, so I highly recommend that they put their heads together for mutual profit!

The preceding information comes from the research and personal observations of the writer which may or may not reflect the views of UNL or UNL Extension. For more information on these or other topics contact D. A. Lienemann, UNL Extension Educator for Webster County in Red Cloud, (402) 746-3417 or email to: dlienemann2@unl.edu or go to the website at: http://www.webster.unl.edu/home