

News Column

by Greg McClure, KSU-Riley County Extension Agriculture Agent
110 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, KS 66502

For Release 11/15/21
Phone: 785/537-6350
Fax: 785/537-6353

GRAZING STALKS

I spent my Sunday afternoon last week building electric fence so I can soon turn my sheep out on corn stalks and soybean stubble. My son, the 18-year-old senior in high school, spent the afternoon sleeping in a hammock in the front yard.

Yep. I'm a failure as a parent. I let him sleep while I worked.

Would you believe that I actually felt guilty for not asking him to help? I have no resentment that he was enjoying a beautiful, sunny day — I was enjoying the day too. I didn't really need help or I would have asked for it, and I kind of enjoy working alone.

Yet, there was this nagging feeling that I was letting him down by not dragging him out of his hammock to unroll wire and drive posts while I sat in the driver's seat of the pickup giving orders.

Parenting is a hard job. You never know if you are getting it right.

Those of you in the cattle business know that a single electric wire will generally hold all but one cow, as long as the wire is hot. That one cow though,....it doesn't matter,....she would be grazing the ditch even if you had a tight four-wire fence.

Sheep are a bit more challenging to keep in with a hot wire. We string up two wires instead of one, and expect anywhere from three to five head to be on the wrong side of the fence when we come home each evening.

In 15 years we have only had one ewe wander off our property, so we don't worry too

much about the get-out group. We still chase them in daily, re-set the fence, and add a post here and there to try to slow them down though, just to feel like we are trying.

Every couple of years I write down tag numbers and sell the leaders of the rebel pack and that helps for a while, but I know the cycle will start again. A permanent woven-wire fence or a tight, permanent electric fence are about the only solutions.

At least I don't have goats.

Grazing crop residues is, in my opinion, the best opportunity to cut costs in the cow business,...or the sheep and goat business, if that is your choice of ruminants. With cows I have the choice of providing harvested forages at a cost of \$2 or more per head per day, or grazing them on residues for maybe fifty cents to a dollar per day. It isn't a difficult choice.

There are a couple of things that can make that cheap feed expensive though, prussic acid poisoning and acidosis. With corn stalks I don't worry too much about prussic acid, because prussic acid isn't a problem in corn. However, most corn has some shattercane, and regrowth from shattercane can be as deadly as sorghum regrowth.

I'm sure you've heard me caution you many times of the years about prussic acid poisoning from grazing small sorghum plants. It doesn't happen all the time, but when it does you don't get a warning or a second chance. You get dead animals.

Because of the risk of prussic acid poisoning (which is primarily a problem in regrowth rather than in the main stalk), we recommend waiting until five to seven days after a hard freeze before grazing grain sorghum stalks. Freezing ruptures plant cells, causing the release of hydrogen cyanide (prussic acid), making the plant safe to consume.

My other concern when grazing corn or milo stalks is too much grain. Experienced cattlemen tell me they turn stocker calves out on corn stalks first if they think they left a lot of

grain in the field. It will take the calves a while to discover the grain and they will work themselves up to a safe level. Cows, on the other hand, will remember there is supposed to be grain out there and might die from consuming too much grain too fast.

Sheep will over-consume grain too. In my lifetime I have killed one cow and one ewe while grazing stalks. Both died after consuming too much grain in the first few hours after being turned out on stalks.

While those deaths were about 30 years apart, I'm not proud of my record and I hope you can do better.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.