



# MOVE IT

## Portable fencing and water options for rotational grazing.

by Heather Smith Thomas

Many stockmen who graze rotationally create a few permanent paddocks with traditional fencing or high-tensile electric wire, then divide those with portable fencing and watering options that can be moved frequently to strip-graze or mob-graze.

There are many ways to create temporary fences.

It's important to have good perimeter fences and a system for

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carrying electricity, says Tim Hoven, who ranches near Eckville, Alberta, Canada. "Then you can use portable posts and run the tape across, attach to the hot wire, and have adequate electricity all the time."

A good fence charger can service fences anywhere you want them.

"If you have to take time to move

portable chargers and make sure batteries are charged, this adds

more complexity to the system. A good hot wire around the perimeter (or anywhere you can latch onto) makes life a lot easier," Hoven says. This saves time, and is often a more dependable source of power than a battery charger or solar power.

He uses a variety of posts, choosing the type to fit the circumstance. If ground is moist and soft, any kind of post will

work. However, if the ground is dry and hard, or frozen, some of the plastic posts won't push in.

"Step-in ring posts go into the ground better. If ground is really hard, we use a portable electric

drill to make a hole to stick the post in," Hoven says.

Ranching near Vermilion, Alberta, Brian Chrisp has been using electric fencing for 35 years, during which time many of the materials for

portable fencing have improved.

"Some years ago we switched to 1/16th-inch steel cable. It's light, tough and flexible and can be rolled and unrolled off reels," he

**"There are many little tricks to make portable fencing easy."**

— Ian Gerrish



“There are several kinds of portable fences and wire, but I prefer braided polywire,” says Ian Gerrish. “It’s durable and easy to handle. You can put it onto a geared reel for unrolling and rolling up.”

explains. “It’s like a light steel string, and very easy to put up and take down.”

He uses a lot of that wire on steel rebar, cut into post length — with any kind of insulators. Rebar is easy to pound into hard or frozen ground, compared to portable plastic posts that break readily.

“We can drive rebar posts into frozen ground and take them out again. We just give the post a couple twists with vice grips and they come out readily,” he explains.

“Most types of portable posts put in

during summer can be difficult to take out in winter,” Chris observes, “but anything you pound into frozen ground will come out easily.”

A few years ago, he started building his own spools and winder for putting up and taking down wire.

“I was using plastic rollers, rolling wire up with a power drill, and some of those rollers didn’t last long. Now with lightweight steel wire, our reels are simple,” he says. “We use a piece of fence post for the core, with round plywood ends on it and a bolt through it. This enables us to put it on a ¾-inch rod — either handheld or on the back of a quad or side-by-side — with a portable electric drill to wind it up again.”

Hoven uses a geared reel for unrolling and rolling up wire.

“These are expensive, but save time, compared to cheaper reels,” he explains. “The geared reels are great when you have to roll up a fence that’s 1,000 feet long or longer.”

Ian Gerrish of Hillsboro, Texas, has a cattle operation and a fence and water-system business.

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You can put it onto a geared reel for unrolling and rolling up.

His advice for anyone getting



Ian Gerrish locks step-in posts together facing opposite directions, making an angle brace with another post. “I’ve pulled quarter-mile runs from that pull point with no problems,” he says.

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started is to get some good braided polywire, a good reel, and portable posts.

“With step-in posts, I prefer no more than 45 feet between posts,” Gerrish says.

He likes O’Brien step-in posts because they are easy to put in.

“If ground gets hard in summer, it may be more challenge, but those posts have hooks on both sides, and it’s easy to put them in and out if the ground is not too hard,” he explains.

Metal pigtail posts also work well.

“These have a metal foot, and if the ground gets hard, you can use a hammer to tap on those. With metal posts you can put more curve in a fence than you can with

step-in posts, because they hold better,” Gerrish says.

“I can lock the O’Brien posts together, however (so they hold for corners), facing opposite ways on top, making an angle brace with another

post. I’ve pulled quarter-mile runs from that pull-point with no problems. There are many little tricks to make portable fencing easy,” he says.

“Ideally, however, you want straight lines, the shorter the

better. I’ve run cross-fences up to half mile of polybraid, but that takes a big reel that’s more difficult to use,” says Gerrish.

“Ideally, you’d have permanent lines 300 to 800 feet apart, then make straight runs between those permanent lines. Moving those portable wires can be accomplished in 10 minutes — to set up a fence and take another one down,” he explains.

For gates, Hoven often uses electric fence gate handles, but a remote control for the fence charger is handy.



Electric fence gate handles work nicely to hook temporary fence to the permanent fence.

“When I’m patching wire, or find a spot that needs patched, I can just turn off the fence from a remote location and fix it — and turn it back on. This is also helpful for gates. Instead of having to depend on a gate handle, or for a place you need to get through where you don’t have a gate, you can simply turn off the fence, go through it, then do it up again, and turn the fence back on — and make sure you have good current again,” he says.

“A fence charger with remote control is expensive, but saves time. If I’m fixing a fence 3 miles from home, before I had the remote control I always had to call my wife or a kid to go turn it off and back on again. Now, with one click, I can fix the fence, and it’s ready to go again,” says Hoven.

His remote control is always in his pocket, and it has a digital voltmeter and amp meter.

“I can test the power anywhere on the farm, and it tells me if there’s a fault — and what voltage is in the fence and what amperage I’m losing,” he says. “If I’m 2 miles away from the fence charger, I just click a button and it tells me the level. It can help me figure out where I’m losing power and how I can fix it, and whether the fix is good enough.”

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## Portable water

Supplying water in multiple locations can be a challenge. Some producers install permanent watering systems to service multiple paddocks that center at the trough, but often it's better to have portable watering tanks. A simple over-the-ground system can work during summer when it won't freeze.

Gerrish uses high-density polyethylene (HDPE) roll pipe that can be rolled up on a reel and unrolled somewhere else. Big reels can often be obtained inexpensively.

"Cable companies may have leftover spindle reels," he offers. "Those are what I use to roll up my pipe. You can roll it over the top of the pipe and gather it that way, but I made some plates on the bale unroller on my tractor. I can then



pick it up with the tractor to move it around."

"There are several types of fittings you can use if you roll it back up. Some you can just tighten with a wrench, or you can use barbed fittings with hose clamps. When you put on hose clamps, always use two, and go opposite ways with them, and the fitting

Left: Ian Gerrish uses leftover spindle reels from cable companies to roll up HDPE pipe to carry water to portable tanks for his rotational grazing system.

Below: Rubbermaid tanks with Apex extra-flow valves provide a durable portable watering system, says Gerrish. "Size the tank to your herd."



won't come loose," he says.

"With an above-ground line, make sure the water doesn't get too hot, or cattle won't drink it," he explains. If a black roll pipe is

lying in the sun, it will get hotter than the ambient temperature.

"I use simple Rubbermaid® tanks, and Apex extra-flow valves that go through the tank. These ¾-inch valves will accommodate 4

to 175 pounds of pressure and provide lots of flow," says Gerrish.

These tanks are very durable, whereas some of the cheaper imitations may wilt in the sun or collapse eventually. You want a tank that will withstand heat or cold weather and not break.

"Size the tank to your herd," Gerrish advises. "I use 300- and 150-gallon (gal.) tanks. Even a 300-gallon tank is light enough that one person can pick it up and put it on the back of an ATV when it's empty."

Water sources may vary — whether you are pumping, using gravity flow, or hauling water.

"If you have to haul it, I feel it's

hard to justify the cost, but for some people it might work,” he says. “You might use a water truck and tie it into a system, and then go fill it up again in a day or two,” he says.

Some people use portable tanks on a permanent system.

“A PVC or HDPE pipe can be run along an existing fence where you can set risers out of the way of the cattle, and use a quick-coupler valve or hydrant,” Gerrish offers. “Then you can cut into the line wherever you need to, and move your portable tank to each new location.”

He likes plenty of hookups.

“Most of mine are 200 feet apart,” he says. “This allows flexibility for where you put the tanks, especially if you are doing high-density grazing and move cattle often. Just make sure valves are protected so cattle don’t walk or rub on them; they will break off if you don’t protect them.”

Jeff Brown, ranching in South



Jeff Brown made a portable water rig using an old Army 6x6 truck. The tank holds 4,000 gallons and can be driven anywhere on the ranch to supply water in far pastures.

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“We just drag some 1.5-inch high-density polypipe around to

service the tank. If the cattle all come to drink at once, there will be 10 gallons for every cow,” says Brown.

“We also found an old munitions trailer at an auction, and put tanks on that, too, with water troughs

along the side. We drop the troughs down when we get to where we want them, lowering them to where calves can reach the water,” he says.

The water is supplied by wells and pipelines. The wells are about 200 feet (ft.) deep, and run about 15-20 gal. a minute.

“We also have other water tanks, and can tap into pipelines from the wells. On one of our places, we have six taps to service 2,200 acres. We drag the polypipe around to where we need it, in 1,000-foot pieces. We drag a pipe through the pasture with our Polaris Ranger® and can also hook it up to the water rig on the trailer,” he explains.

The cattle are moved to different pasture every three days, on average, and it’s handy to be able to move the water with the cows. |

Editor’s note: Heather Smith Thomas is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Salmon, Idaho.