

Raising cattle

WHERE GRASS ISN'T GROWN



Building three hoop barns in 2015 provided the means for Tyler Burkey and wife Megan to grow their cattle business.

When competition with farming and urban sprawl limited opportunity for grazing, this aspiring cattleman got creative.

Story & photos by Troy Smith, field editor

There was a time when traveling across western portions of his home state made Tyler Burkey more than a little bit envious. The large expanses of grassland looked mighty appealing to an aspiring cattleman from eastern Nebraska's corn country.

Where Burkey was raised, good heavy soils, 30-plus inches of annual precipitation and ample groundwater for irrigation make the region well-suited to row-crop production. Most rural acreage is farmed, but a higher human population density also means more land is claimed by urban sprawl and recreational development. As a result, permanent pasture is scarce. Purchase prices and rental rates

for grazing land are high.

When Burkey and his wife, Megan, got serious about developing their own cattle operation, they focused on overcoming what they perceived to be the most significant obstacle — that scarcity of grassland. They employed unconventional production methods, including cow-calf confinement under a roof and grazing of alternative forage crops.

As their business evolved, however, the Burkeys gained a greater appreciation for what their local production environment does offer. There may not be much grass, but the area's abundant crop residues provide the Burkeys operation a competitive advantage.

Building the dream

Tyler Burkey grew up on an acreage near the outskirts of Nebraska's capitol city, Lincoln, where his father had a veterinary practice. Burkey's grandfather and great-grandfather were lifelong grain farmers about 25 miles west,

near Milford. Burkey spent a lot of time on the farm as a youngster — enough to know he liked cattle better than corn.

After earning a University of Nebraska degree in diversified agriculture, Burkey took a sales position with an agribusiness firm. Becoming dissatisfied with the job's travel requirement, he rented some alfalfa ground from his grandfather and entered the hay business. After his grandfather's death in 2007, Burkey rented more of the land and, eventually, all of the family farm.

"Our naivety probably helped," grins Burkey, reflecting on how he and Megan had limited farming experience.

The couple had few preconceived notions about how things ought to be done. It wasn't a big farm — about 700 acres, but they weren't



afraid to look beyond conventional wisdom for innovative ways to do more with the limited land base.

“We had a few cattle, and we wanted to expand, but Megan and I had to decide if we could have a relevant cattle operation,” tells Burkey. “Could we and should we do it with \$10,000-an-acre crop ground and very little grassland?”

A way to start

Inspiration came from a magazine article about confined cow-calf production. The couple researched the concept, crunched a lot of numbers and formulated a plan for managing cows in confinement — and not just confined to a drylot setting, but housed under a roof. Eventually, they took the idea to Burkey’s father, who was supportive. In 2015, three hoop barns were constructed and put into use.

From the beginning, the steel-framed, fabric-covered structures were multipurpose and served plans to provide custom cattle care, as well as a way to manage owned cattle. On a custom basis, the Burkeys managed a herd of about 250 cows owned by three other area cattlemen, providing care from their early-spring calving season until fall. The Burkeys managed a similar number



Tyler Burkey tries to avoid full-time confinement, using annual forages, cover crops and crop residues for grazing.

of their own cows for a fall calving season.

The barns offered relief from the cold, wet and muddy conditions typical to early spring in eastern Nebraska.

Under a roof, calves remain drier, cleaner and healthier. Also, the rain-saturated soils of pastures or farm fields were not subjected to excessive hoof traffic. During fall (late-summer) calving, the hoop barn design provides air flow, as

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well as shade. On hot days, it’s usually about 15° cooler inside.

Early on, each breeding herd was housed from about 15 days prior to calving, through breeding by synchronized artificial insemination (AI), and until calves were weaned at about 120 days of age. After weaning, cows were moved outside to graze pasture, forage crops or crop residues, depending on the season. Weaned calves went into a barn to be grown to market weight.

Time out

The way the barns were used changed as the Burkeys shifted more crop ground to production of forage for grazing, including both cool- and warm-season cover crops and some

intensively managed permanent irrigated pasture.

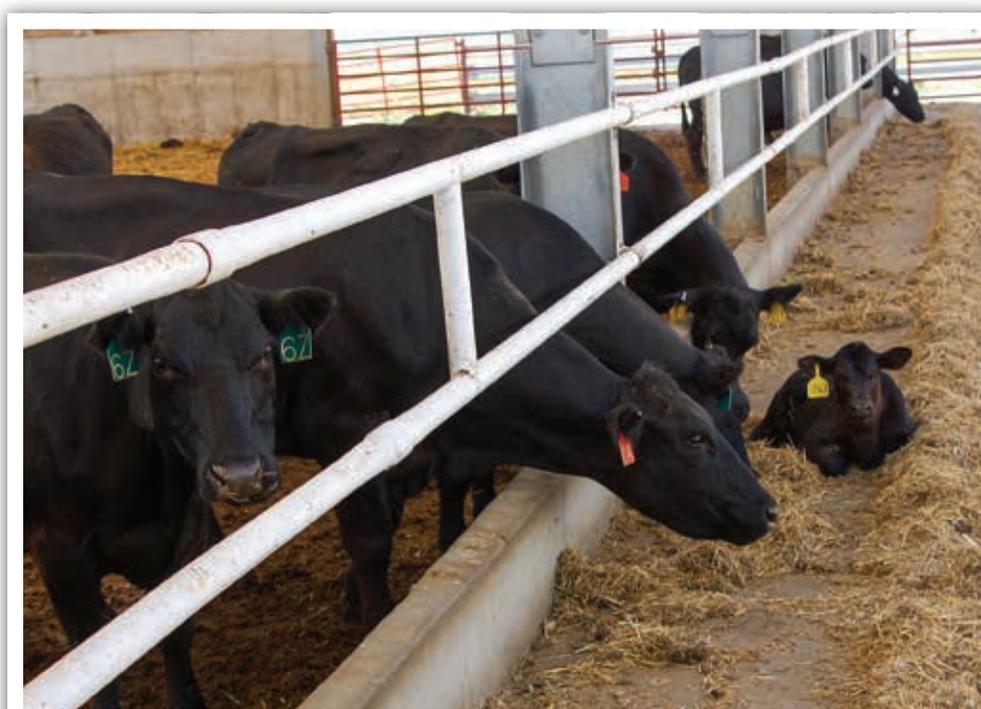
Burkey worked pretty hard to find ways to get cattle out of the barns and on green forage during

the growing season.

The remainder of the year was easier because of an abundance of low-cost crop residues for winter grazing. While the hoop barns attracted plenty of attention, curious folk were often surprised to learn that cattle weren’t being managed under continuous confinement.

“I think that, sometimes, too much emphasis is placed on ‘the barn,’ as if managing cows in confinement and under a roof is the best way to go. It’s not a silver bullet. In our operation the barns have always been just one piece of the management system,” explains Burkey.

Instead of keeping cattle in a barn throughout the growing period, Burkey also experimented with ways to graze growing calves. As barn space became available more of the time, a short-term cow enterprise was added. Burkey purchased pregnant cows and calved them inside, weaning the calves at 120 days of age. Calves



While in confinement, cattle rations are based on low-quality forages (hay, straw or harvested cornstalks) and wet distillers’ grains. The Burkey operation’s competitive advantage comes from abundant and relatively inexpensive ration ingredients and ample winter-grazing resources.

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were then grown to favorable sale weight, while the cows grazed cover crops and crop residues until sold as market cows.

A new view

Pandemic aside, 2020 hastened the continuing evolution of the Burkey operation. After attending the Ranching for Profit School, the couple applied greater scrutiny to their individual enterprises, weighing which were most and least profitable. They recognized the need to look harder at the business side of their operation, and not narrowly focus on production.

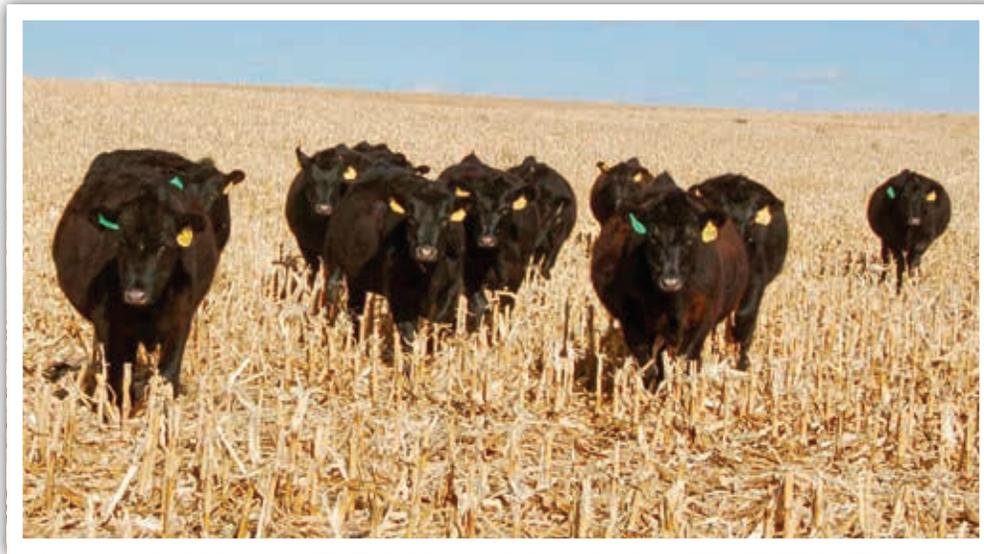
The Burkeys also attended a marketing school based on famed stockman Bud Williams' philosophy that successful marketing hinges on the ability to recognize when cattle are under- or overpriced, and a willingness to take advantage of either situation.

"Megan and I decided that our greatest strength — our competitive advantage — was in the grazing resources available to use from fall through spring. Mainly, it was crop residues. We had access to a lot of cornstalks," says Burkey, explaining how 2020 also brought the opportunity to winter-graze several thousand acres of cornstalks.

"A large local farmer and seed-corn grower wanted to rent our irrigated land. In turn, we could rent all of his fields and graze the residues. Together with our land, that's close to 6,000 acres," Burkey adds. "We wouldn't have to do any 'farming' ourselves, and we could focus on the cattle."

Finding opportunities

Burkey says he put his marketing school lessons to work by becoming an "opportunity buyer," purchasing undervalued cattle and adding value for resale. He buys cows mostly, to utilize those abundant grazing resources



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available from fall through spring — cornstalks and cover crops.

"A lot of good cattle get sold for reasons their owners can't control. Often, it's because of drought," explains Burkey. "So we've been buying groups of undervalued cows.

Sometimes they're a little thin, so we add condition and sort them into groups for marketing. We may calve out some groups of cows and market the pairs. Or we may early-wean calves and grow them awhile before selling them as feeders."

Burkey typically owns the cows for 90-120 days before finding a favorable market. However, he also buys cows for the local customers whose spring-calving herd he still manages. Burkey and those cattlemen have come to better understand the consequences of cow depreciation, so high-quality purchased females serve as replacements for cows marketed before age reduces their value.

Still important to the operation, custom cattle care has expanded. In addition to buying cows out of several western states, Burkey is wintering cows from as far away as drought-stricken Montana and as near as feed-scarce portions of Kansas. Many are managed entirely on cornstalks. However, the hoop barns still play an

important role for calving out custom or purchased cows, weaning calves or getting purchased calves started on feed. Burkey does purchase some calves to grow to heavier sale weights.

"We don't feed silage, and we don't add corn. It's a real-world diet that provides only what's needed. That's enough. We're just using what's available here at low cost." — Tyler Burkey

"We still try to keep cattle outside as much as possible, but the barns still provide needed flexibility," offers Burkey. "We can go inside when we need to. They give us the ability to take weather pretty much out of the equation. That can be a real advantage when trying to straighten out a set of long-haul calves. And cows can be calved at any time of the year."

Using what's available

When cattle are confined and fed, rations are pretty simple and relatively cheap, consisting of low-quality harvested forages — ground grass hay, straw and corn stover — plus wet distillers' grains. Burkey says those same ingredients go into rations used to feed a cow or start a calf.

"We don't feed silage, and we

don't add corn. It's a real-world diet that provides only what's needed. That's enough," Burkey states. "We're just using what's available here at low cost. This operation might not make sense if we didn't have the grazing and harvested feed resources available. We have them at a time of year when shortages often exist in other areas."

Working differently

These days, Burkey spends a lot more time in the office. He routinely checks the drought monitor and studies cow and calf markets across the country. He listens to market-savvy podcasters and reads more than ever. He spends most of his time on marketing, relying heavily on a growing network of people who help determine when it's advantageous to buy cattle and when it's a good time to sell.

"It's working well enough that we hired a full-time employee to help with the production side of the operation. We're thinking about hiring another, and we foresee the day that Megan can quit her [nursing] job and is involved full-time, too," says Burkey, who now spends the majority of his working hours at his desk.

Still needing some hands-on involvement outside, Burkey claims that it's good for his head. However, spending more time in the office working on the business has been fruitful. The Burkey operation is benefiting from the heightened emphasis on marketing.

"Trying to improve production and be more efficient is important," says Burkey, "but I think marketing may be more important." ■

Editor's note: Troy Smith is a freelance writer and cattleman from Sargent, Neb.