

Conference Focuses on Grazing Profitability

by **DUANE DAILEY**

There's so much grass growing in Missouri that it makes a Colorado rancher envious. "You could make it very difficult for Western ranchers to stay in business," Kit Pharo, Cheyenne Wells, Colo., said

after seeing the Missouri grasslands. Pharo spoke at the Missouri Forage and Grassland Council (MFGC) meeting at the Lake of the Ozarks. Missouri producers gather annually to share ideas and hear out-of-state speakers on ways to

increase profits from grazing.

University of Illinois (U of I) Extension educator Ed Ballard said Missourians could make greater use of cornstalks and crop residues after harvest to make cheap gains on cattle during fall and winter seasons.

Farmer Jim Burrus, Jacksonville, Ill., told how he added more beef cows to his crop farm to improve income. Now he is working to extend fall and winter grazing of cornstalks by adding winter annual grasses.

Burrus, who farms about 60 miles east of Hannibal, Mo., said he shifted from feeding harvested forages to management-intensive grazing (MiG) to cut costs and to allow for a doubling of his cow herd size on his farm.

After fall harvest, he fences cornfields with electric poly wire, dividing the fields into 10-acre grazing paddocks. This provides forage from the end of September until the first of January. Feed costs for that period average 10¢ per head per day.

His fall-weaned calves are strip-grazed on cereal rye seeded by an airplane into a standing cornfield. Last year, 48 calves were winter-grazed for 50 days, gaining 2.3 pounds (lb.) per day on cornstalks and small-grain forage.

The shift in feeding cut both feed costs and labor in producing beef, Burrus said. "But, it takes a good deal of management to be successful and increase your profits."

Ballard, who runs a university research farm near Effingham, Ill., said, "I've driven through Indiana, Illinois and Missouri in the last week and saw only two stalk fields being grazed."

Illinois research shows that inexpensive gains can be made on beef cattle when idle crop ground is used for grazing between fall harvest and spring planting. The secret to cheap gains is to let the cattle do the harvesting.

Ballard hires an airplane to seed annual forages on corn and soybean fields prior to harvest. The mix of green forages growing between the dried stalks provides low-cost weight gains with beef cow herds and stocker cattle. The cattle mix their own ration of corn and forages.

Successful grazing of crop residues requires using portable electric fences to control feed intake on strips of forages, Ballard said.

Traveling from Colorado, Pharo noted in his drive across Missouri that most of the pastureland is not being fully used. Missouri has a forage resource that could support more cattle, he said.

Pharo said most successful ranchers that he knows use MiG to improve profits. They divide large pastures into smaller grazing paddocks and move cattle often to get optimum gains from the forage.

Ranchers must shift from being production-driven to being profit-driven, Pharo said. "It is not how big the calf is, but how much profit per cow.

"Having the biggest calves provides 'bragging rights,'" Pharo said, "not necessarily top profits. Some decisions to increase production can reduce profits."