

Research Roundup

Studies focus on cattle care, effects of grazing.

Compiled by Shauna Hermel, editor

Winter grazing, confinement evaluated

Best management practices for winter care of the cow herd aren't always evident, especially when those unfamiliar with raising livestock see animals outdoors in open fields during cold, snowy weather without apparent access to shelter. A recent Iowa State University (ISU) study was designed to evaluate whether the effects of winter grazing or confinement for winter care of beef cows in Iowa would have any effect on the physical condition of the cow or the calf born to the cow in spring. The study looked at two types of winter feeding and care, and compared three management groups of cows at two ISU farm

locations from December to early March.

Project leader Garland Dahlke, associate scientist with Iowa Beef Center, says the cows were at least second-parity and either Angus or a percentage of Angus and Simmental, and all were due to calve mid-March through April.

"Half of the cows in all groups were placed in a feedyard with some degree of shelter. The other half was assigned to a winter swath-grazing protocol," he describes. "All were supplemented with better-quality feed about three weeks prior to calving to ensure adequate forage quality for cows and their developing calves."

Measurements throughout the trial included forage quality, weather data, water intake, cow

weight, visual body condition score, mud score, ultrasound of 12th-rib fat cover and ribeye area, and calving data. Although there were slight measurement differences between and among the groups by location, it appears that, where feedstuff quality is similar between scenarios, there is no difference.

A four-page publication details the project study and its findings. *Winter Care of the Cow Herd: Confinement Versus Open Grazing, IBC147* is available as a free download from the ISU Extension store at <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/16886>.

The study was made possible with funding from the Illinois Beef Association, the cooperation of the Iowa State University McNay



Winter Care of the Cow Herd: Confinement Versus Open Grazing

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Study finds moderate cattle grazing has no effect on sage grouse nest success

Sage grouse and cows can coexist on the same land without declines in greater sage grouse nest success or insect abundance, according to a 10-year University of Idaho (U of I) study.

In fact, according to the research, there are upshots for grouse living side-by-side with cows.

"Nesting success doesn't seem to be affected by low to moderate levels of cattle grazing, and insect biomass increases with grazing," says Courtney Conway, U of I professor of wildlife sciences.

The idea for an extensive grouse and cattle-grazing research

project was spurred by opposition to spring cattle grazing on federal land in the early 2000s and a lack of science to inform the debate. The decade-long research project wrapped up data collection in August 2023.

Conway joined forces with U of I professor of rangeland ecology Karen Launchbaugh, biologists in the Bureau of Land Management

(the agency that oversees much of the sage grouse habitat in southern Idaho), Idaho Fish and Game, several ranchers who have grazing permits within sage-grouse habitat, and other partners in Idaho to bring scientific data to the debate.

"Many decisions regarding sage grouse and cattle were being made by land managers, but there wasn't a lot of science to rely on," Conway says. "We just didn't know what effect spring grazing had on nesting grouse, brood production or anything else."

Working closely with local ranchers who agreed to participate in the long-term project, Conway's group of researchers annually collected and analyzed data from five research sites in Idaho.

"I think this is a significant outcome for the ranching community, which has wondered all along what they would do if scientists learned that their spring grazing was bad for grouse," says Launchbaugh, co-lead investigator. "Had we found that spring grazing had a negative effect on grouse populations, it could have resulted in the loss of grazing allotments on federal land, something cattle ranchers, especially smaller operations, need for their businesses to survive."

— by Courtney Conway, University of Idaho



PHOTO BY GARRETT BRITTON, U OF I VISUAL PRODUCTIONS

Researchers gathered data from sage grouse hens that they caught in the spring using spotlights, nets and ATVs.