



Just Right

Maryland producer makes the most of a mid-size herd.

Story & photos by
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"I'm too big to be small and too small to be big," says Doug Price. "It can work against you at times."

The Sharpsburg, Md., producer's home farm is within sight of Antietam battlefield, a popular tourist attraction, and 70 miles from Washington, D.C. That makes buying more land for cattle production cost-prohibitive. Price's full-time job at the University of Maryland Research and Education Center also makes free time a scarce commodity. That means he is maxed out at around 85 cows. However, that doesn't keep him from getting the most from his mid-size commercial herd.

Price's main tools are management-intensive grazing and user-friendly genetics, delivered by both artificial insemination (AI) and purchased Angus bulls.

Managing forages

He starts with a forage base many producers cuss — Kentucky 31 fescue.

"My uncle planted it in the mid-80s. Cows don't like fescue when it is hot and dry, but it is so tough you can't kill it."

Although fescue does produce a toxic fungus that can affect reproduction, milking ability and weight gain, Price's pastures also contain orchard grass and red clover.

Red clover is the real star. University of Arkansas beef extension

specialist Paul Beck says clover is a key ingredient in getting satisfactory gains on fescue pastures.

"It gives the cattle something else to eat that dilutes out the toxins."

However, he says clover does more than provide a dilution effect. In Arkansas trials, when they added clover to toxic fescue pastures, they got a ½ pound (lb.) increase in stocker average daily gains compared to gains on straight toxic fescue pastures. In addition, Beck says when they interseeded clover into nontoxic fescue pasture, they still got a ½-lb. advantage over straight nontoxic fescue.

"My feeling is the clover adds diet quality, more protein and energy," Price says.

To make sure he keeps a healthy stand of the legume, he frost-seeds a portion of his pastures every three years, using a spinner on his four wheeler.

"I plant 5 pounds per acre, which is on the heavy side of the recommendations. I cover the whole field," he says. "When I seed it, the next year is pretty good. The second year is great. The third year it is gone."

In mid-summer, Price had a problem most producers would envy.

"Right now, we have borderline too much clover," he says. "Last fall it got dry late, and I grazed it shorter than usual. In late spring, every clover seed took off."

Price says the clover is usually ready to graze in late April, right

with the fescue. Then it picks up the slack in the summer, but really slows down in mid-October when the days get short. By then, he usually has stockpiled fields of fescue and orchard grass.

To get the most out of the forages, Price uses management intensive grazing. On his home farm, he manages 66 cows on 105-110 acres, or around 1.5 cows per acre. That's quite a feat in northern Maryland, where the winters can be tough and long.

He has 28 paddocks, which he leaves up to cut down on chore time before and after work, but subdivides them with temporary electric fencing as needed.

"They usually stay in a paddock for one to two days," he says, "but paddock size is trial and error."

Normally, when he is AIing, he divides his cows into two herds, the AI herd and the natural-service herd. They are on different rotations for 30 days until he puts them together. This year he didn't AI, so the whole herd is together.

"With grazing, you have to be flexible. Don't be afraid to change." At the first of July, he said, "I have too much grass right now, but I'm trying to think 30 to 60 days ahead. What do I want to stockpile?"

Kim Mullenix, extension beef specialist at Auburn University, agrees



Sharpsburg, Md., commercial cattleman Doug Price makes the most of his herd despite limited land and cattle numbers.

with Price's approach to grazing. "When going from continuous to a more intensive

rotational system, there is increased forage utilization. We use available forage more efficiently because there is less forage waste. Because we do make better use of the forage, there is the potential for a greater stocking rate."

Mullenix is also sold on the practice of stockpiling.

"It is an excellent method for extending the grazing season, especially with tall fescue and tall fescue mixes. It holds its quality better than many forages and is a very productive forage," she says. When fertilized properly, and when using improved grazing management like frontal or strip grazing, the beef specialist says producers can often get 30-60 days of additional grazing from stockpiled tall fescue.

Even with management-intensive grazing and stockpiling, Price normally has to feed hay from February through April. The majority of it is purchased rather than homegrown.

"My neighbor still makes 8 acres for me," he says. "He did cut 40 acres on halves, but with cattle prices so good I can have more cows and buy hay."

He also says, “The hayland was so wet, I was always the last one he’d get to. It would still be standing here, and it would drive me crazy.”

Price says he can get a 500-lb. roll of fescue hay for \$25.

“When I did the math I decided I needed more cows,” he says.

Even last winter, which broke records for cold, snow and ice, he fed 25-30 lb. of hay per day. Still, he figures his carrying cost is \$1 a day, year-round.

Washington County extension agent Jeff Semler agrees with Price’s thinking, noting, “In our area we can usually buy hay cheaper than we can make it. Doug has a limited land base and is better off buying hay.”

Semler adds, “Since it dried off the first of August, he would have had a hard time grazing those fields again.”

Advancing genetics

Along with management-intensive grazing, Price also makes optimum use of his cow herd with top-notch genetics, particularly using AI. This past spring was the first time in 12 years he didn’t AI. One of his co-workers retired, expanding his workweek even more. Plus, in early June, when he normally AIs, it was hot and raining almost constantly. Still, he says he’s a fan of the practice.

“I could see some quick improvement when I started AI,” he says. “I got some really nice calves and saved some daughters.”

Semler, who has been working with Price since he bought the farm in

1995, gives the thumbs up to Price’s use of AI.

“It introduces genetics we can’t afford,” he says. “It also keeps a smaller herd from getting too closely related, because it gives us the opportunity to introduce new genetics.”

Rather than AIing only his replacement heifers like many producers, Price AIs his better mature cows.

“I rent a small place for my heifers,” he explains. “It is 6 miles from here, and I have a calving-ease bull I like a lot.”

He keeps the whole process as simple as possible.

“I heat-check instead of synchronizing them,” he says. “I feel like synchronizing them and running them through the chute that many times made everybody get on edge. It wasn’t fun.”

Now, he heat-checks and breeds everything that shows heat for six days. On Day 7, he gives a prostaglandin injection to all the cows in the breeding group that haven’t shown heat yet.

“Most of them come in heat within

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three days,” he notes. “It shortens the window for me.”

After two more days he turns in the clean-up bulls.

“I’m a commercial guy,” he emphasizes.

Between his 10-day AI season and 60 days with the clean-up bulls, he normally gets conception rates around

90%. However, he says, “Last year was phenomenal. I culled some cows and was up to 95%. Usually the second-calf heifers only have a conception rate of 65% to 70%, and they were up to 90%. Seventeen out of 19 virgin heifers bred.”

When his first-calf heifers don’t rebreed, they go to his small fall-calving herd on another farm, which is strictly a terminal-cross herd.

“After that first time, I don’t cut them any slack, but they are my lowest value culls,” he explains.

If they do breed back after the extra few months of regaining condition, it means he has more calves to sell. With prices still on the healthy end of the cycle, that helps, although he still doesn’t have the numbers to sell a trailer load lot.

“Some years I’ll have a group of 20 to

30 steers and the order buyers will come to the farm to look at them,” he says. “If I have a private buyer, I’ll precondition, but now, with the high prices, I get more at the auction barn.”



Editor’s Note: *Becky Mills is a freelancer and cattlemaster from Cuthbert, Ga.*

Just right genetics

Doug Price is all about optimum production, not maximum. He’s found that with Angus genetics.

The Sharpsburg, Md., producer started with Brangus and Balancer cattle.

“Brangus always makes them grow. We get some humid summers, and they slick out and can handle it,” he says. However, he found the cows were too big to fit his grazing system.

“When we preg-check, most of my cows weigh 1,100-1,200 pounds (lb.), but the older ones weigh 1,400 lb.,” he says. “I get a few more calves now that my cows are smaller.”

Price says the extra calves make up for slightly lower weaning weights since he started using the smaller-framed bulls. His calves out of his smaller cows average 540 lb., while those out of the larger Brangus and Balancer cows weigh around 570 lb. at weaning.

However, when he first started looking at Angus bulls, he shied away.

“The bulls were not what I needed. They were too big for my operation,” he explains. He discovered there were smaller-framed, easier-fleshing Angus bulls available, though.

He has settled primarily on genetics from Ohlde Cattle Co. in Kansas. However, whether it is Ohlde cattle or the Angus breed in general, he says, “There is such a selection. If I want calving ease, I know how to get calving ease. If I want to improve any trait, there is the data to back up my choice.”

There is also the market. “Especially for me, being this small, if I have one eared calf in a group of eight or 10, the buyers see it, and I get docked.”

He adds, “After 12 years of keeping really good records, I know what works here.”