FOOTHILLS FORAGE AND GRAZING ASSOCIATION
*Innovation, education and regenerative agriculture*
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# GRASSROOTS NEWS & VIEWS
# SEPTEMBER 2020

## Director's Note - Daryl Chubb

**Howdy folks;**

I hope this finds everyone healthy and in good spirits as another production year is wrapping up. It has been another challenging year across the province and western prairies ranging from drought, saturation, and back to drought!

I, with my family, am located just west of Irricana and implement many aspects of regenerative farming in my professional and personal life. We bought some land 5 years and go and have turned it from hay to a system using cows, managed grazing, annual grazing, swath grazing, and bale grazing to improve the efficiency of our land and cattle. We are also marketing our calves differently to extract a small premium adding to the bottom line. We have seen good growing conditions in the area but have really dried up with no rain in the last 6 weeks. Well managed land is showing its ability to retain forage/grain quality and quantity.

I was welcomed as one of four new FFGA directors at the AGM held in July. I am looking forward to being part of an organization that is sharing so many concepts to its members, meeting and interacting with new people, and collaboration. I hope my experience and involvement in agriculture will continue to build on what Foothills Forage & Grazing Association is accomplishing.

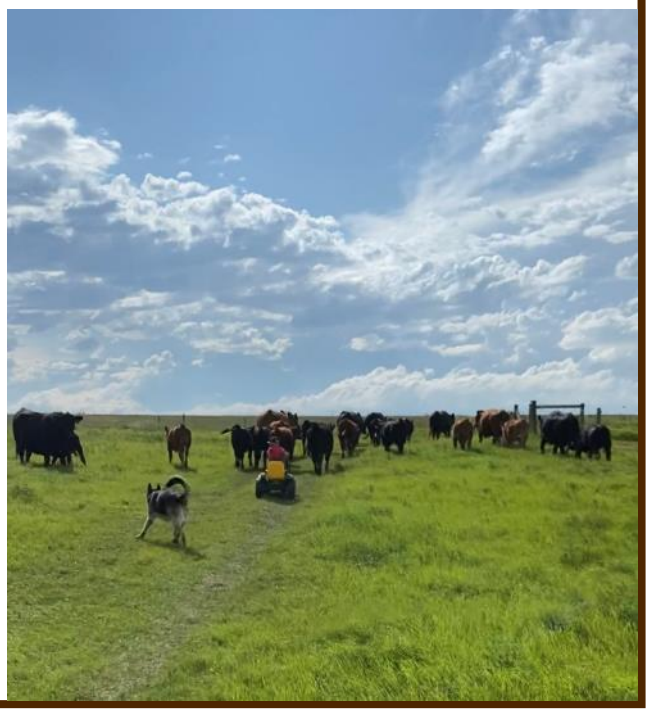
I attended the past workshop at the Waldron Ranch in mid August. It was so good to be outside with others, socially distanced that is. It was my first time on the ranch, and if you have not been there please do so next time. For me, it was great to see how Mike and the crew has implemented managed grazing 0n a grand scale by choosing "the low hanging fruit". He has started by choosing areas that were easy to get water and fencing figured out.

Please watch FFGA on your favorite social media platform and website for upcoming events. The next events, Perennial Pasture Rejuvenation; will be held on September 9 at Madden Community Hall & Southern Cross Livestock and on September 29 at the Claresholm Community Centre & Symens Land & Cattle Co. If you were unable to attend the live webinars this summer, there are some great ones to watch featuring BCRC, Jim Gerrish, Grant Lastiwka, Dr. Allen Williams, Ray Archuleta, and Gabe Brown plus many others. They are all posted on the website under the "Webinars" tab https://www.foothillsforage.com/recordedwebinars

In conclusion, I hear many past and present board members say that they have learnt so much from being part of Foothills Forage; I look forward to the same. I hope haying season went well, harvest has started, and good luck during weaning!

**Daryl Chubb**

*Daryl gets some help moving cows*



### IN THIS ISSUE

# Keep and eye out for blue-green algae in dugouts

*The cyanobacteria is highly toxic and it's better to be cautious, says water engineer.*

When temperatures rise, you need to be on the watch for toxic bacteria in dugouts.

"Blue-green algae is actually cyanobacteria, and can produce toxins that can be very dangerous," said Shawn Elgert, agricultural water engineer with Alberta Agriculture and Forestry. "It can cause organ damage or even death if ingested by livestock or pets."

"If you are trying to determine the cause of poisoning, there are other potential toxins on the farm that can also cause damage to cattle, including poisonous plants such as water hemlock."

The first and most important step is to identify the type of growth, said Elgert. Blue-green algae can look like blue-green scum, pea soup or grass clippings suspended in the water.

If blue-green algae is suspected in a dugout, it is best to be cautious. "You should contact a water specialist to diagnose the growth to determine if it is potentially a toxic growth," said Elgert. "You should also remove your livestock from the water source in the interim and prevent them from accessing it. One rule of thumb is that if you can grab it as a solid mass in your hand, it is not blue-green algae."

If blue-green algae is present, the dugout can be treated using a copper product registered for use in farm dugouts. Once treated, consumption should be restricted for up to a month.

"The use of copper will break the cells open and release the toxins if present into the water all at once," he said. "It's important that you stop using the water during this time so the toxins can degrade. You can follow up with aluminum sulfate and/or hydrated lime treatments afterward to remove nutrients from the water to prevent regrowth."

There are also preventative measures that can be taken to try to avoid the problem.

"Temperature is an important factor in the growth of blue-green algae, so a deeper dugout with slopes that are not too flat would help make the dugout water cooler."

Nutrients can be reduced by buffer strips and grassed waterways.

"Dugouts should not be built in the waterway, as sediments can bring more nutrients into the dugout and depth can be lost quickly," said Elgert. "Aeration of the dugout can also help improve the water quality. A dye packet can also be thrown into the dugout to help prevent photosynthesis from occurring, thereby reducing the growth of blue-green algae. However, one action alone may not be enough to prevent growth."

Wind can push the blue-green algae into highly concentrated pockets where the risk of harm is higher.

"Since blue-green algae can rise or fall in the water column, inspection of the dugout should include peering into the deeper part of the water," he said, adding someone should go with the person doing the dugout inspection and have a rope with a flotation device attached to it.

*Author: Alberta Agriculture & Forestry. Original article can be found at [https://www.albertafarmexpress.ca/news/keep-an-eye-out-for-blue-green-algae-in-dugouts/?module=under-carousel&pgtype=section&i=](https://www.albertafarmexpress.ca/news/keep-an-eye-out-for-blue-green-algae-in-dugouts/?module=under-carousel&pgtype=section&i=)*

***On the Cover: Cattle grazing in one of the many paddocks found at the Waldron Ranch.*** *Photo by Sonja Bloom*

## Thank you to our municipal supporters!

# FFGA Perennial Pasture Rejuvenation Workshop

## Tired, worn out pastures? This hands-on & classroom workshop will give you the tools to rejuvenate like a pro!

### Details:

**Date:** Wednesday, September 9, 2020
**Location:** Madden Community Hall & Southern Cross Livestock
**Time**: 9:30 to 4:00
**Cost:** $30.00 for FFGA Members, $35.00 for Non-members + GST (includes lunch)

### Topics:

Experts Grant Lastiwka & Graeme Finn will present on:

- Direct/sod/frost seeding
- Planning ahead for success; preparation, species selection & rotation
- Managing for success; establishment, fencing & weed control

*COVID-19 public health restrictions are in place for this event. If you feel unwell please do not attend. Please maintain at least 2 meters (6 feet) of space at all times. Masks & hand sanitizer will be available.*

Registration & information found at: https://www.foothillsforage.com/events

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FOOTHILLS FORAGE AND GRAZING ASSOCIATION

# Is it time to rejuvenate that old hay field or pasture?


Photo: Sonja Bloom

Dandelions, Canada thistle, pasture sage, gophers and moles and new grazing tolerant grass species coming in are all signs that pasture productivity is going downhill. Trying to get one more year out of that grass stand and extending the grazing season to try to reduce costs has caught up with many cattlemen.

"With so many years of low returns in the livestock business many producers couldn't afford to take depleted pastures or hay stands out of production and reseed others," admits Grant Lastiwka, Grazing and Forage Beef Specialist, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (prior, now with Union Forage), "We're seeing many of these older forage fields that have lost their productivity. If cows are put out too early this spring or left out too long in the fall on these depleted stands, it will result in a drought situation production."

"We can definitely get more out of our pastures IF we manage them differently," continues Lastiwka. "We're seeing fields that are in survival mode and in order to begin the climb back to a healthier productivity, producers should try to plan for longer rest periods for this grass. If you aren't able to rent a little more pasture to give your existing pastures time to recover and get in better condition, then you may have to look at reducing numbers to achieve the same result. Or, it may be time to look at reseeding."

Re seeding is an opportunity to add a more desirable mix which can include more grazing productive grass species and adding some legume. Although these species do require more grazing management, they will produce more beef and grazing days in return.

When is it time to reseed? "If the species that was seeded is no longer present, then it may be time to start over," admits Lastiwka. "It's important at this juncture to determine if this new stand will be best utilized as a hay/future pasture or solely as a grazing pasture and seed accordingly."

"If you can't afford to reseed, then the next best thing is to rest it from grazing in the spring and don't "grub it off" in the fall. Some forage species you think are gone may surprise you and come back with this rest and deferred grazing management."

You just can't graze your way out of grass production reduction.

Lastiwka stresses that you can't consider low cost pasture management a "no cost" way of raising cattle. "It catches up to you," he warns. "But, it takes more than money to turn things around. The pieces needed to improve the system are attitude, willingness, knowledge, planning, labour and maybe even some dollars."

Planned grazers, or graziers using whole systems management (like Holistically Managed Grazing) have all proven how effective these shifts in grass management philosophies have allowed them to improve their grass stands, make production from year-to-year more stable, maintain their herds and maybe add, not subtract, cattle numbers.

Over a 7 to 10-year period the Western Forage Beef Group at Lacombe studied pasture management and extended grazing systems. The improved benefits they found came because of a number of management changes i.e. ongoing planning, wise use of costs, increased labour and knowledge dynamically being applied. The results showed that a more intensive grazing management system penciled out at about half the cost of traditional winter feeding methods. Work at Agriculture Canada at the Brandon Research Centre, over a similar 10-year period, showed that a summer legume/grass unfertilized pasture was about twice as productive as straight grass and more profitable.

Before spring turnout next season, take a look at your pastures with a more critical eye and put together a strategy for the best timing and use of each pasture, making sure that there is always an adequate rest period for growth recovery for each pasture.

"While rejuvenation will take time, the results will begin to show surprisingly quickly," suggests Lastiwka. "First of all, feeding just a little while longer until the spring grass is a little more established, will give you more time to assess the health of the grass. It's a 365-day grazing game. If you do not want to put more management time into your pastures, then at least start out grazing a little later. Also, plan to rest pastures or hay stands that have little regrowth in late summer or fall. This will allow plants on these stands to hold more snow and greater numbers of tillers to develop giving you some carryover and growth beginning earlier and more vigorously next spring."

*Author: Bonnie Warnyca. Original article published in 2011 and found at [http://www.albertabeef.ca/content/it-time-rejuvenate-old-hay-field-or-pasture](http://www.albertabeef.ca/content/it-time-rejuvenate-old-hay-field-or-pasture)*

Foothills Forage & Grazing Association Presents

# South Perennial Pasture Rejuvenation Workshop

## Tired, worn out pastures? This hands-on & classroom workshop will give you the tools to rejuvenate like a pro!

### Details:

**Date:** Tuesday, September 29, 2020
**Location:** Claresholm Community Centre
**Time**: 9:30 to 4:00
**Cost:** $30.00 for FFGA Members, $35.00 for Non-members + GST (includes lunch)
**Registration deadline** - September 25, 2020

### Topics:

Experts Grant Lastiwka & Graeme Finn will present on:

- Direct/sod/frost seeding
- Planning ahead for success; preparation, species selection & rotation
- Managing for success; establishment, fencing & weed control

*Pre-registration is required as space is limited to comply with the COVID-19 public health restrictions. If you feel unwell please do not attend. Please maintain at least 2 meters (6 feet) of space at all times. Masks & hand sanitizer will be available.*

Registration & information found at: https://www.foothillsforage.com/events

MD of Willow Creek

NEOGEN

FOOTHILLS FORAGE AND GRAZING ASSOCIATION

# Low-stress weaning for calves

Photo: Lee Gunderson

*A less stressful weaning process makes for healthier calves*

Weaning time has traditionally been traumatic for calves, mama cows and ranchers, but it doesn't need to be.

"There are better ways to wean calves, says Bart Lardner, a beef and forage research scientist at the University of Saskatchewan.

"Abrupt weaning is the most stressful, for both the cow and calf. The question has been posed by several researchers — who is more stressed, the cow or the calf? We did a small study several years ago, looking at this," he says.

"The study was twofold. We were doing some extensive grazing as well as testing weaning strategies with fenceline weaning. We separated the cows and calves, with a fence between them, where they could still be nose-to-nose with each other. We had some trainer cows (older dry cows) with the calves, to show them how to eat; we had them on millet swaths. There was very little vocalization from the calves during this weaning process; they went out to graze and got full, and came back to lie down by the fence near mom. The cows on the other side of the fence were bawling their heads off. We surmised that maybe the cow misses the calf more than the calf misses the cow —at least until her full udder quits hurting," says Lardner.

"For the calf, we replaced the milk with a good diet, and the calf still had mama through the fence," he says. It is harder on the calf if mama is clear gone and he has to adjust to her absence and new feed all at once.

"The stress of abrupt weaning, where you truck the cows or calves to opposite ends of the ranch, is tough on them; they try to break out and come back to each other. Our study was interesting and showed that we need to think through this and reduce stress, because you want those calves to come off the milk diet and go onto a forage diet gaining weight," says Lardner.

Lardner did some of the early work on two-stage weaning with Joe Stookey, using nose flaps (Quiet Wean), and says that works very well. Neither the cow nor calf is stressed because they stay together. The cow wonders why the calf isn't nursing, and he wonders why he can't, but they have each other for company, and there is very little bawling.

"In our experience, about five to 10 per cent of them lose the flaps (popping them out if they rub on something) and a few get smart and learn how to twist their head and use the side of the tongue to grab a teat, but most of the calves can't nurse and are weaned by the time you take the nose flaps out a week later. Then you can separate them with no problems. The data shows less vocalization, less walking, etc., than with other weaning methods. We are seeing more producers using nose flaps for weaning," says Lardner.

"We want to wean with the least stress possible, because calves can be exposed to so much — especially if they are put on a truck and moved to a sale barn. If those calves are stressed they are more at risk for bovine respiratory disease complex, especially if commingled with other calves." They are much less likely to get sick if they have gone through a non-stressful weaning process.

**Late weaning**

Art McElroy winters his calves with their mothers on his farm in Saskatchewan. "I fought Mother Nature most of my life, whether it was winter calving, fertilizing, and battling every weed and bug with herbicides and pesticides. I never succeeded. Working with Mother Nature is a lot more fun than working against her. Now we calve in June/July, and this changed our thinking about how we wean and market calves, develop heifers, etc.," he says.

He usually doesn't wean until April or May. Calves stay on their mothers all winter, which saves feed and labour. "This is better than grain feeding to develop their rumens and enables them to become good foragers. They learn a lot from their mothers, as well," says McElroy.

"I am not really very original in what I do with my cattle. I've read articles written by Walt Davis, Chip Hines, Burke Teichert and Kit Pharo over the years. My philosophy has been a long, slow evolution. The cow business is very low margin and our traditional way of raising cattle has built some tremendous expenses into growing a calf," he says.

"Reading articles by innovative thinkers helped me understand where my costs are. One of the ways we try to reduce cost is by leaving the calves on the cows. We now realize there is no cheaper place to develop a heifer than on her mother," says McElroy.

"We try to winter graze as much as possible, which reduces the cost of raising that heifer and she is also out there learning from her mother. This is also the healthiest place to keep her for the winter." This can also reduce other costs — not having to treat sick calves or have death loss from disease. The healthy heifer will do better for the rest of her life, compared to one that was compromised by illness.

"Normally I don't wean until late April. The calves go back out where the cows were — half a mile from home, either grazing or bale grazing — and the cows stay in the yard. The calves just head back to the grazing, and may hike back and forth a bit, but

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it's very low-stress weaning," says McElroy.

By that age they don't need milk anymore and the cows are not milking much. "At that time of their life I don't know how much milk those calves are actually getting, and by that age they are more independent than a younger calf. They have learned about grazing from mom. After about a day-and-a-half I move the cows clear away and the emotional tie is not as strong. The stress of weaning is mainly breaking that tie," he says.

"To separate them at weaning, all I do is put them in a corral, open a gate and let the cows go back out past me. With our stockmanship, they are all trained to walk past me. So I can let the cows go out, and stop the calves, and I can do this by myself. I put the cows in a nearby pen, and then the calves go back out to where they grazed with their mothers. It's a very quiet process compared to having a bunch of bawling cows and calves in your yard in the fall," says McElroy.

"It's an easy transition. Health issues are minimal; I don't remember if I've ever treated a calf. They don't bawl, they don't wander around in the dust, not eating or drinking. The stress is so much less," he explains.

**Step-by-step weaning**

Mike Hittinger and his wife Melissa, a veterinarian, raise Speckle Park cattle near Clyde, Alta. "We run 150 pairs and typically background our calves, and wean them with the least stress possible. We use nose flaps, and it's a little extra work, but it's the only method I've seen in which calves don't lose weight during the weaning process," he says. Calves weaned with minimal stress stay healthier and keep gaining.

"If a person were to sell calves in the fall after weaning, this method would have them in much better shape, and you wouldn't lose so much money on shrink and lost gains," he explains. Preconditioned calves — weaned for 30 to 60 days before being sold — are past any stress and do well. You don't have to spend 45 days making up for lost gains during weaning.

"When we wean, the first thing we do is put pairs in the pasture the calves will be in. Then they are familiar with it and know where the feed and water is. Then we put in nose flaps and give fall vaccinations at the same time. Ideally, a person would vaccinate two to three weeks prior to weaning, but this method works because the calves are not stressed; they are staying with their mothers. Because we are doing low-stress weaning, they don't have any problems from being vaccinated at that time," says Hittinger.

"If you were to give them vaccines and stress them with the traditional weaning (separating them from the cows at the same time), you'd run the risk of having some of them get sick from vaccination." Also, a stressed calf won't be able to mount good immunity from vaccination because stress hinders the immune system.

"With no stress, the calves don't have adverse effects. We've been using the nose flaps for about 11 years, and we've learned that the optimum time to leave those in is four days. Then we pull out the nose flaps and separate cows from calves, putting them in adjacent pastures so they still have fence-line contact," he says. They've been with mom, but haven't been able to nurse for four days; the cows are drying up and the calves have adjusted to not having milk, while still having mom for comfort and security. Thus the next step, being through the fence from each other, is easy.

After a few days of being in adjacent pastures, the cows are removed completely and taken to a different place. "We came up with the four days because it seems that after that length of time calves tend to lose more of them (nose flaps); they start figuring out how to pull those nose flaps out. If we leave them in for five or six days, enough calves have pulled them out that it makes it more of a problem when we separate them from the cows; there's more of a ruckus." Four days is long enough to do the job and you can get away with separating them, without losing very many nose flaps.

"If you leave them in too long and a calf loses his nose flap after five days or so, he goes right back to sucking the cow. Four days seems to be enough time for the weaning process without losing nose flaps, and then the pairs are across the fence from each other." If any of them are still a little insecure, they still have mom nearby.

"When we put pairs in the pasture where the calves will remain, they are eating feed with mom — the feed they will have after weaning. They learn to eat it with mom and know that it's okay. We are changing just one element at a time, allowing them to gradually adjust over a span of two weeks, rather than changing everything at once," he says. It's a lot easier on

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them.

"The year our first daughter was born it was weaning time, and we got lazy that year and thought we'd just fenceline wean. We'd been using nose flaps before that, and when we skipped that part it wasn't easier! I had to fix more fence that year from calves and cows crawling through, and I realized that the time I spent fixing fence we could have easily put in the nose flaps!" says Hittinger.

"It's not complicated; it just takes two trips through the chute, but it's worth it. The other thing I'd like to try — that Joe Stookey, a professor emeritus at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine, talks about — is a half-gate for more easily sorting calves from the cows," he says. With this method one person can sort them; the cows go one way and calves are halted and go under a half-gate into the adjacent pen.

"That would make it even easier, because the hardest part of putting the flaps in or taking them out is sorting the pairs, to put the calves down the chute. Right now our alleys aren't set up to facilitate this easy way of sorting, but if they were it would make this whole process a lot easier," he says.

*Author: Heather Smith Thomas. Original article can be found at https://www.canadiancattlemen.ca/features/low-stress-weaning-for-calves/*

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## Board of Directors



## FFGA MISSION & VISION STATEMENTS

**Mission:** Assisting producers in profitably improving their forages and regenerating their soils through innovation and education.

**Vision:** We envision a global community that respects and values profitable forage production and healthy soils as our legacy for future generations.

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Alberta Government

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