## Extending the Grazing Season with Cattle Producer Levi Swanson

## Season 1, Episode 44

[Intro music]

**Kiernan Brandt:**

Welcome to Cattle HQ, a podcast from industry experts and progressive producers discussing cutting edge info about the cow calf sector to keep cattlemen and women in the know and positively affect their bottom line.

**Robin Salverson:**

Welcome to Cattle HQ, brought to you by South Dakota State University Extension. I am Robin Salverson, Cow/Calf Field Specialist, living the life in Lemmon, South Dakota. I am joined by Madison Kovarna, our SDSU Extension Beef Nutrition Field Specialist, and she will be my co-host for this episode. Our guest on this episode is Levi Swanson. Levi is a cattle producer from Crooks, South Dakota. Welcome back to Cattle HQ, Levi. You were actually one of our very first guests on our episode when we started this here a couple years ago, and I’m glad you were willing to join us again and share your experiences as a person raising cattle, but also more specifically about how you and your family are trying to extend the grazing season on your operation. Levi, like I said, you are a family operation. You’re a diversified farm and ranch and you’re located just outside of Sioux Falls, at Crooks. Anybody that’s not maybe familiar with Crooks, it’s just Northwest of Sioux Falls, not too far out of town. Could you just share a little bit about your current management and that can be everything related from your cows to how you manage those cows and maybe how you incorporate them into your farming?

**Levi Swanson:**

Yes. We have a cow/calf operation. Our cows actually go out to Bell Fourche for the summertime because we lease a ranch out there and we winter them back here in Crooks. I guess, as of the past, wintering our cows, we’ve done it pretty traditionally where they ran on stalks for a little bit, and then we would always have a supply of feed for however long time. Whenever the snow flies, we would start feeding and do that up until the point where we would ship them out somewhere around April 1st, and they would go out West and calve out there.

**Robin Salverson:**

You’ve been, like you said, pretty traditional using stalks and then feeding harvested feeds basically after you weren’t able to graze those corn stalks anymore, just wasn’t able to because of the snow, right?

**Levi Swanson:**

Yes, yes.

**Robin Salverson:**

That’s what you’ve always been doing, so that’s what you continued to do at this point, right?

**Levi Swanson:**

Yes, that’s kind of the thing. We didn’t know any differently, so that’s the way we always did it until we started doing a little reading and research and all that stuff and tried to start incorporating different ways to - when are the cows back here to cheapen up our feed costs for the cows.

**Robin Salverson:**

That’s what we want to get into right now, is how you’re extending that grazing season. I had the opportunity to visit with you and your dad at Dakota Fest here in August, and I was really intrigued by what you guys were saying. I know this is going to be your first year of trying to accomplish this, extending the grazing season beyond just using corn stalks, right? Do you just want to share a little bit about this new vision that you have when it comes to this type of management?

**Levi Swanson:**

Yes. The way that this got started was I was doing a lot of research and started reading books, and I guess I came across some of Jim Gerrish’s books talking about how to manage or graze - management intensive grazing. I read those books on mats and just kind of started diving into that and paying attention to what he was saying with strip grazing and all that stuff, how you could push your feed source a lot further. In the past, with the corn stalks, we always - we’ll just give them the whole field. You’d have however much time with those cows being out there. They would eat all the goodies out of the field. They would kind of let you know when it was time to be done, so you’d get them off that field and move them to the next field. Last year, what we did was we actually tried to calculate how much feed was out there per acre, and then we took our cows and divided the amount of cows into what we thought the amount of feed was out there, and we started strip grazing those stalks. From what we found last year, I think it probably doubled the amount of time that we could be out on the stalks just by strip grazing them just because percent utilization seemed like it went way up, because when they were allotted only a certain amount of feed out there, they would take the best, the better, the average, the poorer, all in that amount of time, and then when you give them the new paddock to step into, the whole process would start over again. Not only did it stretch our corn stalks, I feel like it kept the cows in a little better condition just because it was averaging out there their daily consumption and ration, and having your eyes on the cows every day, it seemed like you knew what they were wanting or what they were needing.

**Robin Salverson:**

You said you did some calculations. How did you do that? I mean, how did you look at that field and say, “This is how much area we need to give to these cows?”

**Levi Swanson:**

It was pretty swaggy math. [Laughter] I started looking around as much as I could to try to figure out what was out in that field for the husks, the leaves, stalk, all that kind of stuff. I actually found an article. I think it was out of University of Lincoln, and I can’t remember exactly what they said was out there for like the most edible parts of the stalk or the plants and everything, but for some reason, 16 lbs. per bushel comes into my head. I think that’s what the article said, so I just worked off of that number right there just as a starting point. If we had 200-bushel corn, I multiplied that by 16. Whatever number that gave me, then I just took that, divided by 30, and I figured that as my cow days per acre out there. I took the amount of cows that I had, divided by the cow days per acre, and I would try to allot that many acres for the cows for like a three-day or a two-day move.

**Madison Kovarna:**

We think it’s important to remember when we start doing these conversations that sometimes cowboy math gets us pretty darn close and that we don’t necessarily have to be right on the money when we make these decisions, but like you said, you didn’t really know what you were doing, but you went, and you found some resources that kind of got you in the ballpark, and you saw benefits even if it wasn’t entirely super scientific reasoning or methods behind it. I just love cowboy math. I think it gets us pretty far in what we do every day and allows us to have some wiggle room when we make these expectations for these cows as well.

**Levi Swanson:**

On the one thing that I learned from it was that the cows will let you know what they want, because if you planned a three-day move on day two, if they’re standing at that fence line ready to move, your math was wrong. You move that fence a little bit further the next time and you kind of see if your math was right on the next move.

**Robin Salverson:**

I guess I have a little bit of a question in regard to adaptation for your cows. I mean, since you allowed - I know during the summer you don’t have any electric fence up, at least you haven’t, I should say, so they’re not familiar with the electric fence out there, and prior, you didn’t use electric fence in your fields because you just allowed them to take that whole field. Was there an adaptation period for your animals to respect that electric fence? What was their behavior? Did it make you nervous right away? Because some people, when you start limiting their area, people get nervous.

**Levi Swanson:**

The cornfields that we have back here, actually, we would have a perimeter fence of electric wire, so they already kind of knew what electric fence was. When I stripped off the first paddock when we first did it, they kind of ran up to it like, this is where the end point is. They really didn’t test it all that bad. The funny thing was, after doing this for about 10 days, those cows understood what that barrier was for the strip grazing, so you could almost have that fence off and those cows would graze, and they would wait for you to show up to move to the next paddock. It was kind of funny. It was just almost psychological in their head how quick it changed where it was like when I showed up, I started rolling up the fence, they knew they were getting a fresh paddock, there was good feed there. I mean, they all settled down when they went in there and it was no big deal. They never really tested the fence because we were out there so much with them that they just kind of knew when we showed up, it was time for new feed.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I have heard that a lot with electric fences, that it’s more of the psychological fencing. Once they really start to understand the process, moving those cows and having them work with you, it’s so amazing how quick that they learn it. Like you said, it took them, what, like 10 days or so to learn that process, and then after that, they’re pretty much sitting there running your time clock, and if you’re [Laughter] busy, you’re running late getting out of bed in the morning, they’re over there, like your boss with your timecard, saying, “You’re late for work. Where are you?” I think that that’s really cool and speaks to the testament of when we work with livestock, with cattle in particular, they really work with us, and if they can work with us, it makes a lot of management a lot easier to conduct and do and kind of incorporate these new strategies into our management day-to-day.

**Levi Swanson:**

Yes.

**Robin Salverson:**

You mentioned – oh I’m sorry, Levi. You go ahead.

**Levi Swanson:**

I was just going to say, it was funny we were able to graze all winterlong using those kind of moves, and by the end of the wintertime, you could about stand next to that electric fence and scratch those cows’ heads because it was almost like they gained trust in you. You could just reach out and touch them, and they were just waiting for you to move that fence, and it was nothing for them to just walk right next to you, to walk out to the new paddock and start eating.

**Robin Salverson:**

Animals are amazing. Cows, sheep, whatever it is, they will adapt and do what you need to do. Did you find there was a timeframe that was best for moving, though? Because you know everybody has a different thought in this. Was the two to three-day move good? Would you extend it to seven days? Do you think that would be as beneficial or that’d be a bigger detriment on your utilization? I’m just curious on your thoughts. I know you’re just starting to explore this last year and so wondering what you were going to do this year.

**Levi Swanson:**

I guess the reason I tried to do two-day moves for the most part and the reason behind it was when I read the book that Jim Garrish wrote, I was going off of percent utilization and intake in an animal, so off of his studies. I don’t know if it matters in the wintertime or not. I was just doing it because he put this out. What he said was percent utilization on the shorter moves actually goes up substantially, so like if they get to free-graze a field, I think he said you’ll get a 33% utilization out of the feed that’s out there, but the tighter that you bring it in and like shorter moves you can get up to like a 66% utilization out of the forages that are out there. Then another reason why I did the two-day move was the intake of a cow. Every day or every time they moved into a fresh paddock, he showed that their intake would spike up dramatically. At the end of day two, it was hitting the bottom of a bell curve but when they moved again into that fresh paddock, the intake would spike. My thought process was I’m trying to put cheap gain on these cows if I could, so I was actually supplementing with a little bit of NPN as well but I was just trying to drive their intake to put good body condition on them so when I brought them out to the pasture, they would start out in good body condition for calving.

**Robin Salverson:**

A lot of times when you talk about whether it’s daily or every other day moves, or even three days, it doesn’t really matter, but those more intensive moves is labor. People just don’t want to have to do that. I was just wondering, what was your thought prior to you doing this, and then now what is your thought about what it takes to do this like labor-wise and time?

**Levi Swanson:**

I would much rather move a fence than I would start a feed truck to feed a cow. [Laughter] It’s plain and simple like that. I got so sick of hauling feed out to the cows and having muddy messes here, there, wherever. I mean, moving a fence in the wintertime, it may suck certain days and everything like that, but you get out there, you get out on your feet, you start moving, it warms you up. You get a little bit of exercise while you’re moving. I mean, you get to see your cows, what they’re doing, how they’re performing, everything like that. I mean, really, labor-wise, it takes a little bit but it’s not bad at all to go move a fence every couple of days for cows just to go feed themselves.

**Robin Salverson:**

Levi, in regard to setting up your fences, did you do that in advance, because you mentioned you actually may give them more space if needed? Did you just set them up as you move them, or did you set them up in advance? Because the ground starts to freeze, there are different things that go on. I was just curious on how you handled setting up your fences.

**Levi Swanson:**

I guess when we would move them into a new paddock, that day we would go set up the next paddock. As they were grazing, we were out setting up posts for the next one, so that way we didn’t have to come out there when they were hungry and wanted to move and we’re setting up a fence and they’re just dancing back and forth, wanting to get into the new fresh paddock, so that’s how we kind of tried to play that out. Then we actually went and bought some of those Gallagher tumble wheels, so when it got cold and the ground got too hard where we couldn’t put posts in it anymore, we actually just started using those tumble wheels. In that case, we didn’t make a paddock, the next paddock for the movement. We would just go move those tumble wheels on the second day or the third day to give them their fresh paddock, and it seemed to work pretty well.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I was actually curious, going back a question, I guess. One of the things that you really liked about extending your grazing season with these crops is the fact - or just crop residue, I should say, is that you get to spend more time with those cows. My question for you was, with your cows living half of the year or so in Bell Fourche, was that kind of a big driver for wanting to potentially maybe do a more intensive style where you get to spend more time with those cows? Since you do have limited time with them, they’re over in Crooks, was that maybe a driver in making this decision or what drove you to want to extend your grazing seasons?

**Levi Swanson:**

Actually, it came down to the profitability of the herd. I knew that putting feed up, bringing it to the yard, running it through a grinder, running it through a feed wagon, all those numbers were adding up and hurting the profitability of the herd. My main reasoning behind doing this is actually having the cows feed themselves and we are just the managers of the cows to try to increase profitability. That was an added benefit, was being with the cows and being able to see their body condition every day, temperaments, all that kind of stuff because, like I said, when you’re out there moving fence and you’re looking at the cows, I mean – and the nice thing is they all herd together when you’re doing that strip grazing. It’s not like you have cows scattered all throughout a cornfield and you just kind of take a look over them, and it’s like, “Well, I can kind of see all of them, I think,” but not really. This process here allows you, when you move that fence, they all come running into that paddock and you can just be a few feet away from them and be able to take a good look at them and figure out if there’s an issue with one of them or if you need to do anything.

**Robin Salverson:**

I have a question. Is there anything additional you’re going to add this year or in the future in regard to different types of crops or different types of management? You mentioned last year you started the strip grazing in corn, and I know you grow other crops. Is there any thoughts on changing it up and adding?

**Levi Swanson:**

Yes. Last year was kind of a flu, having an open winter for as long as we did. We knew that if we wanted to keep this winter grazing system going, we had to look at other options for feed for the cows. We actually stumbled across swath grazing. We actually planted a field to sorghum this year and we are planning on swath grazing it this winter.

**Robin Salverson:**

This year, are you going to - with that swath grazing, are you going to provide only so much access to a part of that field just like you did with strip grazing with corn but just in the swath of the sorghum?

**Levi Swanson:**

Yes. This will run pretty much like the strip grazing of the corn stalks. I’m actually working with David Bruene. He’s out of Iowa State, but he’s kind of been the one teaching me how to do this because he currently does it down there. When we get a little bit further on here, I don’t know if it’s going to be another month or 15 days, or something like that, we’re planning on swathing the sorghum that’s standing out in the field, and he’s going to come up and help us do some calculations on the amount of feed per acre that’s out there for these cows. Once we can calculate that, we will set up probably once every two-day moves or something like that to swath-graze this sorghum.

**Robin Salverson:**

I happened to be at a field day last week and it was in Lemmon, so quite a bit of distance from you, but we were spot - they’re going to be doing some spot grazing and some cover crops. They laid down their cover crops into a swath, and they were going to be doing a very similar thing, too, as you, but they didn’t - they just made the choice just to lay it down and not bring in and start combining swaths to make it taller, and, bigger and fluffier. When visiting with the gentleman from Iowa State, did he make any suggestions on - I know you’re going to - your swaths are going to be pretty big and probably fairly tall, if you want to say that. Did he make any suggestions, though, in that regard, if you need to combine swaths to make it more substantial so that the cows can find it, they can see it, if it does snow, that they can actually get to something? Does that make sense?

**Levi Swanson:**

Yes. We have talked about it, and he told me, he said, “If we can combine those swaths where they’re not too massive to the point where you can’t get your fence to run perpendicular with the rows or anything like that, we won’t put them together, but if we can, we will.” The reasoning behind it, I guess back here, we do get the snow, sometimes it can be a lot of snow. Yes, it does make it easier for those cows to find the swaths. From what he told me off of his studies, percent utilization of the feed actually goes up when they are raked together, and it is one big windrow of feed. I don’t know why, but that’s just what the studies have shown and that’s kind of what we’re going for, is the best percent utilization out of our feed.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I wonder if some of that less utilization, if that row is not as tall or bulky, it’s just simply because those cows, when they’ve never been exposed to something or they just get tired and want to take their afternoon, after-lunch nap, they just lay on it, and then they kind of look back at it later and say, “Well, that’s not - I’m not going to eat that.” I wonder if that’s almost a benefit for you guys wanting to combine some of those to make them a little bit bulkier, just it might limit some of the want for those cattle to want to lay down on that resource for putting out there in hopes that they make it into a feed source rather than just a bedding down source for them as well. That’s my thought of wondering why that might happen there.

**Levi Swanson:**

That was another thing that we had discussed. I think David has actually done it where he’s allotted maybe five days’ worth of feed. I can’t remember exactly what he said, but he said, “If you do a lot too much feed to those cows, they will start using it as bedding.” That I think becomes the big deal behind giving them only two days’ worth of feed, is because that will really decrease the chances of them using it as a bedding source.

**Robin Salverson:**

Once you get it started, Levi, I’d really - next time, I’m down in your neck of the woods, I’m going to stop by so that I can take a look at what you’re doing. It sounds pretty awesome that you’re taking that initiative to do something different to help you with your profitability. I know when Madison and I were talking about this podcast and this opportunity to talk with you, and this being a fairly new management strategy you guys started incorporating, and you mentioned one reason why was profitability, right, that’s why you’re starting to incorporate this, but what are some of those questions? What kind of questions were you asking yourself to prompt this change? You said profitability was one of them, but was there anything else that was like nagging at you?

**Levi Swanson:**

I guess I was getting kind of sick and tired of doing the same old thing and just, I don’t know, being stuck in the same routine of this is what it costs to feed this cow through the wintertime, you got to have this piece of equipment and this piece of equipment. I mean, it was just all those kinds of things that was bothering me. It was like, “There’s got to be a different way to do this.” Honestly, I just didn’t really care bringing feed out to the cows every day because when you wake up in the morning, you start the feed truck, you go to feed the cows, they’re standing, their bell ringing, and it’s like they’re hungry. I was like, “There’s got to be a way or a different way to do this.” Once we started implementing the strip grazing and just watching how calm and content those cows were when we were doing this, I was like, “This makes more sense to me than mechanically feeding these animals every single day.” It just flowed more in line with mother nature where I was like, “This is the way it’s supposed to be.” Like, I would prefer to try to move down this path to see what I can do with this than just stick with the same old routine.

**Robin Salverson:**

Less stress on you and less stress on the animal… [Laughter]

**Levi Swanson:**

Yes

**Robin Salverson:**

…in reality. We mentioned at the beginning of the podcast, it’s you and your family. When I say you and your family, it’s multigenerational, so it’s your parents, and you, and your wife, and your little girl. I do know that you and your dad work together very closely. When you started thinking about this, because it was in your mind, and you had to go talk to your dad about this, how did you start that conversation, and how did you approach it? Because I think that’s one of the biggest challenges of implementing change, and I hate to say this, it’s usually our parents or our [Laughter] grandparents that are - because you mentioned it right at the beginning of this podcast, again, that, “It’s what we’ve always done.” How did you talk to your family about it? How did you talk to your parents about this change?

**Levi Swanson:**

It kind of came gradually. Honestly, I’m thankful for podcasts because we listen to a lot, like Working Cows, Jared Luhman’s podcast, just all those and some of these guys that were being interviewed on these podcasts were already doing these things. I just was listening, researching, doing all that stuff, and my dad started listening to a few of them, so it wasn’t like I had to break the ice with it or I was like, “This is what I want to do.” Someone would come out with an idea on one of these podcasts, and I was like, “Why don’t we try thinking about how we can incorporate this at our place?” I mean, it started all coming along, and he was never one to shoot down any of my ideas. I’m very thankful for that because, I mean, he kind of told me, he’s like, “If you think it’ll work, try it.” I mean, I’d go try it, and some of these things that we’ve done, they’ve worked out great. I mean, just watching him, having fun with it, too, I don’t know, it’s kind of fun to do these things and enjoy what you’re doing.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I think that’s a big thing that we tend to forget in this industry, is that we get - it is stressful to run an operation. It’s stressful to have cows and always on the day you’re having the worst day. It seems like everything breaks and everything goes wrong, and you just don’t want to go out there the next day. I think it’s important to remember when you’re making these decisions that you really need to make sure that you’re enjoying what you do, and if you ever question at any point that I’m not having fun, like you mentioned earlier, when you get in the feed truck, you were just tired of going out and feeding the cows, they’re sitting there waiting for you, and this is really what I should be doing, and kind of taking that thought and running with it and thinking of how you can make your operation more enjoyable, I think that’s something that makes me really warm and fuzzy on the inside when not only did it work for you profitability-wise, but it also just makes you happy to go to work again. I grew up with my dad and grandparents of running an operation, and as a kid I was always so enjoyable as when I saw my parents enjoying what they’re doing. Then it’s so cool when you start to have these big changes that are coming up that just make the operation more fun to be on and enjoyable day in and day out.

**Robin Salverson:**

I’m also very thankful that the way you and your dad approached it was successful, and I’m so happy and it makes me smile when I hear that there isn’t this, “Well, we can’t do it that way because we’ve always done it in a particular way.” Probably the words that I hate hearing the most is “I can’t.” There are times that you can’t, but you need to keep that open mind before you say those words. That’s probably one of my biggest frustrations in life. I’m not going to say I don’t say “I can’t,” but when that’s the very first words out of someone’s mouth is “I can’t.” I’m glad to hear that it’s going well and I look forward to hearing how this winter goes, and like I said, when I’m down in your neck of the woods, I’m definitely going to drop by. I’ll give you a text first just to let you know, [Laughter] but I’ll grab Mad…

**Levi Swanson:**

You’re always welcome here.

**Robin Salverson:**

Thanks. I’ll grab Madison on my way down, and we’ll come and check out your place again.

**Madison Kovarna:**

It’ll be like a little family road trip.

**Robin Salverson:**

Yes. [Laughter]

**Madison Kovarna:**

Get in the car and go down there. That would be fun.

**Robin Salverson:**

Is there anything else, Madison, you want to share or ask? Or if not, we’ll probably be wrapping up this episode here.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I can’t think of anything super specific off the top of my head. I just think the biggest thing for me in this episode that’s been a recurring theme is that the cows should work for you and with you rather than the other way around. Don’t fall into the cycle of saying that in the wintertime when you’re feeding cows, and there’s opportunities, and there’s always reasons why we might have to go, give them some supplemental feed, but having those cows do the job that they were put on this earth to do, which is go out there and graze and use their feet and their legs to get out and walk, and you’re seeing that grazing behavior year round not only impacts those cows, but if they’ve got babies at side, those calves are also learning those behaviors. If heifers come back and those heifers are now familiar with this management, which is something I’m intrigued to see in the future, Levi, if you retain any heifers out of this group, if those heifers come back and are kind of already pretrained to this and kind of adapt to it a little bit faster, I’m intrigued to see how that works for you in the upcoming years.

**Robin Salverson:**

I guess maybe I had one more thought after Madison made the comment about cows and cows working for you and not the other way around. There’s not only a benefit to the cows because you mentioned there’s a - you saw the benefit in production of your cows with body condition score. There’s got to be a benefit to your ground also, to your soil, to your production there, and just with that urine coming back onto that ground and along with that manure that’s providing nutrients. As time goes on, you’re going to see that benefit, I think, even more, don’t you think, Levi?

**Levi Swanson:**

Yes, I think so. That was actually another reason why we started doing this. I think his name is Johann Zietsman. He has a book called “Man Cattle and Veld,” and I read that one as well, and there was a line in there that really hit me. It’s that, “Cattle are supposed to improve the ground that they are grazing on and efficiently convert grass into beef.” When I thought of those two things I was like, “That’s why I want to start my grazing systems, is because I want them to improve the ground that is one of our main goals but to also efficiently convert the grass into beef.”

**Robin Salverson:**

That’s awesome. Thank you for sharing that. That really does say a lot. Thank you, Levi, for joining us, joining Madison and I on this episode. As always, you did a great job, and we appreciate you taking the time to do this. I know you’re busy, lots going on here in the fall, so thank you for joining us.

**Levi Swanson:**

Yes, thanks for having me.

**Robin Salverson:**

Absolutely. Before we end this episode of Cattle HQ, I want to give a shoutout to the Ag Economic Dialogues that are held every month. The next webinar will be November 15th. It’s a free one-hour webinar, but you do need to register at www.extension.sdstate.edu. If you have an interest in the Ag Economic Dialogues, make sure you check out our website. Once again, this has been Cattle HQ, brought to you by SDSU Extension Headquarters for all things beef cattle. Visit extension.sdstate.edu for the latest beef information. Until our next episode, do something that brings you joy.

**Kiernan Brandt:**

Thank you for tuning into this episode of Cattle HQ. Brought to you by SDSU Extension, headquarters for all things beef. We invite you to visit extension.sdstate.edu for the latest beef information as well as subscribe to the show on Spotify. You will also find show notes and resources from today’s episode, until next time. Remember, success is not a goal, it’s a byproduct.

[Outro music]