## Stalk to Stock: Grazing Corn Residue

## Season 1, Episode 45

[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.

**Madison:**

Welcome to Cattle HQ, brought to you by South Dakota State University extension. I am Madison Kovarna of Beef Nutrition Field Specialist based out of Watertown. Joining me today is Heather Gessner. She has joined us for previous episodes. So, I'm excited to have her back with us. But for those of you who are unfamiliar, Heather is SDSU Extensions own Livestock Business Management field specialist, and primarily works with farm and ranch families on a variety of farm management issues. Those include, but are not limited to livestock budgets and marketing, risk management, estate planning, farm transitions, and whole farm business planning. Heather is joining me today to share some information about cornstalk grazing and considerations that come with this management choice. Heather, it's great to have you back. The last time we talked, we talked about estate planning and your sustaining the legacy program. But we're going to shift gears a little bit and talk more about cornstalk grazing and maybe some economic things that come along with that management choice. I will leave the floor to you here to start off this episode here with maybe a quick introduction of yourself for our listeners who aren't maybe super familiar, and maybe what's got in your mind thinking about cornstalk grazing for our producers.

**Heather:**

Thanks for welcoming me back. It's always a pleasure to be here. A lot of the things that I do related to this farm management side of things, I try to look at the common practices that are going on out in the fields, out in pastures, and put some economics behind them, and maybe evaluate different considerations that we could expand on that might help the profitability and sustainability of our operations. One of those things given fall weather, and the combines are rolling, and semis are driving up and down the road is the aftermath grazing components of corn, soybean acres, and those types of things where we can be mutually beneficial to the cow guy and the crop guy even if those two guys aren't the same guy.

**Madison:**

We're seeing a lot of producers that engage in cornstalk grazing, which I personally love to see. I think it's a great feed source that we can use for these cows especially for our spring cows. Those cows are having some pretty low requirements at that stage of gestation there. So, utilizing these lower quality feeds in the terms of energy and protein in those cornstalks is something that can really make that feed bill a little bit cheaper at the end of the year for our producers. With that, we talked to - you had mentioned some profitability and sustainability points. But what are some business considerations that maybe come with the management choice of either deciding to begin cornstalk grazing or continuing that portion of our businesses?

**Heather:**

Yes. It comes down to the economics and the legal aspects. A lot of times in that decision when we start making, are we going to graze stalks? Are we renting them from a neighbor? Are we going to talk to a neighbor and inviting them to come to our fields and graze them? As we start thinking about what the the value of cornstalk grazing is and we look at the expenses related to keeping a cow every year, it used to be $1.00 per head per day. But now, it's closer to $2.00 or $3.00 per head per day to keep a cow on our operations. We're looking at $700.00 or $800.00 of upkeep and maintenance just to feed a cow for a year. So, if we can run them on cornstalks and utilize some of those low-quality forages, and the leaves, and the husks, and those types of things, as well as run some cleanup on corn that spilled or fell off the ears - or fell off the stalks. Excuse me. We can really look at a feed source that is much lower than $3.00 per head per day. Generally, we're not having to feed some of those expensive harvested forages that we put up all summer. We're not having to haul manure out of a lot because the cows are returning that organic matter straight to the field all by themselves. So, there's just a lot of components I feel that are beneficial for both the crop side and the cow guy of running cattle out on cornstalks throughout the fall and winter seasons.

**Madison:**

I always love to see cows out when you turn them on to that fresh cornstalk pasture, the cornstalk field or whatever kind of crop residue we're talking about. I’m watching them go out there and start looking for those corn kernels that maybe fell off in the processing through the combine or potentially, you see a cow pop her head up with almost a whole corn stack hanging out of her mouth. It's always just fun to see them do that, and having producers take advantage of a pretty cheap feed stuff that maybe they grew themselves or potentially have, like you said, an agreement with the neighbor to graze that field to not only take that residue off, but then also place them newer back - back onto that field. Kind of talking off of that topics, for our producers who don't have any real crops, don't grow corn, they're kind of just in that cattle business, how can they incorporate cornstalk grazing? You talked a little bit about renting. But what does that look like for those producers?

**Heather:**

I agree. I call them my happy cows. Happy cows come in South Dakota in the fall when they're out grazing on cornstalks, and they find that ear. You can almost see them smiling as you drive by. We're thinking about some of those rental rate components. It really depends on the price of corn. When price of corn is high, corn rental or corn residue rental rates are generally higher than when corn is low. I've seen rates everywhere from about $0.50 per head per day up to $1.00, $1.50 per head per day. We like to see some of those rates or from my component, from an economic side, I'd rather see you pay on a per head per day rate than say on a per acre rate especially up here in South Dakota when we never know when we're going to get that first snowstorm that pushes us off of those grazing acres. Maybe we get one day of good grazing. Then, we have six, eight inches of snow that sticks around. We're done grazing. So, we pay for the days and the number ahead that we graze instead of paying for so many acres on an acre basis that way. Another thing that we really want to be thinking about when we're putting that rental rate out there and whether we're willing to pay it or we're trying to figure out what we're going to charge our neighbors, think about the amount of water availability and if water needs to be hauled because that's going to be one of our biggest limiting factors on whether a field is grazable. We want to think about fences. Do we need to put up 100% hot wire all the way around or are there existing posts that we can use? So, that really takes in another piece of that rental rate. If I'm putting in how many hours of time putting up and taking down hot wire around fence or around a field, that's another big component that we want to think about when we're putting that rental rate to it. The other part, when we talked about how much down corn is out there, think about what the value is of the cows cleaning up the corn and reducing the amount of volunteer corn that you might be fighting next year in your soybean crop. So, what's the value of removing those falling down ears in terms of chemical removal next year when you're trying to get it out of the soybeans? So, those are some of the big components to think about when you're putting a rental rate on the ground. Then, I also really encourage guys. Even though it's a pretty minimal thing when you think about it of, “Yes. Come rent my acres and graze your cows.” I'd still like you to see a written lease agreement whether it's on the back of an envelope that says, “I, Bill, I'm going to rent your corn acres, John. I'm going to rent them for this many dollars per head per day. I'll have them off of there by March 15th or whatever the timeline is.” So, that everybody is on the same page and everybody has the same understanding. That kind of comes from my estate planning work that I do because what happens if you - one of you involved in the lease agreement has an accident and you're not able to communicate with your family or you have died? At what point then does anybody else know what's really going on? It's really important that we have that written down that says we're paying so much on a per head per day basis. That's why I've got 500 head of cows out there on 40 acres. I'm mob grazing this. I'm cleaning it up. I'm getting them on the field fast. Then, we clean up the corn that's in it. We get off the field fast. So, determining that rental rate where you're going to start as your base and then evaluating the water and fence that's available, and then having a written agreement so that everybody knows what the plan is and what we're all paying, and what happens if your heirs need to know would be some of those big considerations that I'd really like you to think about as you start putting some of those numbers down on paper.

**Madison:**

You never want to see a situation where potentially someone has this rental agreement, and then all of a sudden everything goes up in smoke, where now, there's no good working relationships between these two people because the cost per head per day at the end when I'm writing you the check for my cows being there is different in my head than it is in yours. Just having it simply written down, like you said, on the back of an envelope on a gas station napkin, if you do have one of those small notebooks that you have in your truck when you're driving around and you're talking to people having just some simple documentation really goes a long way for when things do happen. It's not an if. It's a win. Making sure that everybody's on the same pages. That way, we don't end up in a pretty sticky situation there at the end. One other thing that's an option as well when it comes to cornstalk grazing is we could also - if we didn't want cows on those fields, we can bail that residue up and haul out of that field. But what are some considerations to think of on that front, not only for our cattle producers, but our corn producers in the state? Are there any different things we need to think about if we're bringing sales in and maybe doing some, a different business opportunity there?

**Heather:**

Yes. Like we mentioned, not every field might be grazable due to fences and water. Maybe just distance away from the farm. How are you going to trail cattle to them or do you have to haul everything? If you've got a lot of cows, hauling them becomes pretty expensive too. So, bailing might be an option for you to consider. It provides that resource, that forage resource, that we can add distillers grains too and make some relatively cheap rations for our cows as we go through the winter months. Some of those considerations as the – or as the corn owner that you might want to be thinking about is how much residue do you really want to remove? There is a fertilizer value to having that forage or that fodder on the ground and becoming part of our nitrogen system and those types of things. So, really thinking about do you want 50% of that residue left? Are you looking at taking 80% of it off? Because that's really going to make some differences in, one, the number of bales that come off of there and whether we're running a rake to get as many of the total bales as we can or if we're just baling it straight off of the ground, that direction as well. So, think about how much forage or - excuse me, how much of that potter you really want taken off. That's a good spot for you to start so that you can take advantage of selling bales, but still have some of that standing dry matter that turns into your nitrogen process as you go on.

Some of the reasons that we consider some of these options, if we put in or getting $250.00- or $220.00-bushel corn, there's some pretty heavy pounds of of gray matter out there that we're leaving. That really turns into a great big blanket come springtime, which helps reduce or it doesn't really help you. It's really slowing down that heating process for the soil which kind of is component to what you're going to buy for seed types, and if you're putting those different seed blankets on them so that you can plant in cold temperature corn or cold temperature ground, or if you're looking at different ways that you can get that soil to warm up faster. Maybe baling and removing some of that is better for your operation. There are some considerations of compaction. Some guys have told me that I don't want cows on my ground because it compacts the soil. That's no good for the corn crop that I want to raise. There have been studies by Nebraska. It would be one of our close neighbors that have done several studies that say there really isn't compaction due to cows grazing the field especially if we're grazing when it's like this dry out and the ground is frozen. We get those cattle out by March thaw so that we're really not compacting any of that soil that way either. So, maybe you feel like compaction is a problem in your area. So, you're looking at bailing instead of - to remove some of that stover, instead of allowing cattle to graze. Yes. That's another one of those things that you could be thinking about. So, really, lots of options between the grazing and the baling component where you can get the best of both worlds and have some of your nitrogen resources out in the field, clean up some of those fallen ears so that we're not fighting volunteer corn the next year, and putting weight on cows at the same time.

**Madison:**

One other thing too that I always like to mention when we talk about the value of cornstalk bales is not only as a feed source, but for those producers who do cab in a dry lot situation or cab in areas that maybe don't have the most protection from our wonderful South Dakota winters that we can experience here is those cornstalk bales make excellent bedding for our cows. A lot of the times, I always love to see when producers are throwing out cornstalk bales and those cows will plop it out for you. You don't have to take the extra work to roll that bale out. They have a fun time pushing that bale around and getting those cornstalks to fly and picking the corn out of it. There's a lot of benefits to both sides of the coin here whether you want to bale it or graze it. It really is just what works best for you. We talked a little bit earlier about hauling water. I think that's something we tend to forget or it's not at the forefront of our minds when we're making these agreements. Sometimes it is more efficient and cost beneficial there. I'm not sure it's the right word that I want to use, but I think everybody kind of catches the drift that I'm on with that. But if we're hauling water, sometimes having that cheaper feed source for a couple more months washes out that cost of hauling in that water. But it's really sitting down, and doing that cost analysis, and seeing what works best for you. If you're still around the fence, maybe talking to some neighbors who do that as well. We've talked a lot about corn that's already harvested or ran through a combine in regard to grazing or baling, but I did want to ask. It is kind of gaining some popularity with some producers. Do you have any thoughts on planting corn specifically for grazing standing cornstalks? So, corn that never gets run through a combine on a safe standing in the field, and then we turn our cows into it. Do you have any thoughts on that business strategy?

**Heather:**

Oh, it’s that friend of mine that comes back into play when you're talking to somebody that has farm management in their title is that this is really going to depend on your operation. What does it cost you to plant an acre of corn? By the time - if we're starting to graze cow straight out in corn like that, what's the economic considerations? How much of the corn are they going to actually eat versus what gets knocked down and maybe trampled into the dirt and becomes more of a wildlife resource than something for our cattle operations? If you can make that be profitable for your operation, maybe save some pastures over grazing come fall. Maybe it's a patch or a field that you're using so that you can keep cows out of your lots and out of having to pull them feed. That might be something that is really hard to put a number on on the economic side, but we really need to look at the total operation and what you think your chances of getting it grazed and fully utilizing that resource every winter. I'm not saying it's right or wrong. I'm thinking that this is going to be good for summer operations and for other places. It might not be the best decision depending on snowfall, when snow comes, all of those other considerations that we don't have a lot of control over. I have seen a lot of corns, a lot of standing corn get grazed. But that's generally in years where snow came quicker than we wanted it to, and we weren't able to get it combined. That's one way that we can utilize the corn that's out there. One way that we can harvest it basically to get some value from that standing corn using it as a planned grazing system. Like I said, it might work for some, but I really encourage you to start putting that budget to paper and figure out how much corn are we planting. What's it going to cost? Are we going to fertilize it so that we get - are we planning on 100 bushel per acre for this standing corn?

So, we're planting the seeds. Not two inches apart. They are six or eight inches apart, allowing more space for those cows to wander through without knocking the cornstalks down. Narrow rows on such a grazing system might not be something that's really beneficial if you're running 1,300, 1,400 pound cows out there. They might knock down a whole row as they're meandering through. So, maybe you're - it's really hard to say this out loud. Maybe you're breaking out that 40-inch corn planter that's been out in the trees. If you're planning on this grazing of cornstalks so that those cows have enough space to actually wander down through the rows without knocking all the corn off. So, best management strategy that I can tell you. Put your budget together. Think about the weather conditions. Think about some of those other issues, the water, the fence, and all those components before you jump in with both feet.

**Madison:**

Another thought too when it comes to grazing standing cornstalks is potentially, maybe there's a field that you know is going to yield lower than maybe it makes sense in a budget standpoint to turn on the combine, and run the combine, and bring out all the heavy equipment out there. Is the yield you're going to get off that field worth it or would it just be easier to turn the cows out and let them kind of have a heyday with it wandering through? I find it so funny when you brought it up giving those cows some space because when we talk about some of our big mooing cows that go wandering through, they can get some girth on them to the point where they do need that 40-inch road just to make it through without trampling over a whole row on their way through. So, that one made me smile when you said it. I enjoyed that you brought that up, Heather. But we're nearing the end of our time together for this episode. So, I wanted to give you a couple of minutes. If you have any closing thoughts that you wanted to leave the listeners with today about cornstalk grazing or maybe just about some different considerations when it comes to different management choices.

**Heather:**

Yes. We're just kind of wrapping up. One final, I guess, thought on that grazing standing cornstalks. If you're utilizing crop insurance on that field, making sure that that's an established or recognized practice by your risk management companies is going to be important because if you got it insured and you didn't try to run a combine through it, I want to make sure that you're covered for that type of practice. I'm not saying it is or isn't. Just something to consider as you're thinking about that. A couple of other take homes to think about when you're starting this grazing practice is one of the reasons I was told by several farmers and ranchers that they don't graze cornstalks is that they lose a cow or two every year when they put cows out to cornstalks. So, making sure that your cows are full, make sure that their bellies are full of grass, hay, or something so that when they go out on those cornstalks, they're not just inhaling every ear of corn that they see and really change the dynamics of that room. We got to watch out for that pretty hard. Another key to that and to preventing any cattle losses which makes us an uneconomical situation in a hurry is to go clean up the spills. If you'd have a green cart driver who's new when they miss a load, those 14- and 16-inch augers coming off of those combines, they're dumping a lot of corn in a hurry. So, even if it's just a couple of seconds where you missed your wagon, there might be a lot of corn on the ground out there. So, mark that spot so that you know. Go clean that up. Take the skid steer. Take the loader tractor. Take some five-gallon buckets. Whatever it is, clean those spills up. Save yourself a cow that way.

The other thing, and you mentioned it early, is the nutrition. There's a lot of nutrition out there, energy and protein, while they’re still corn on the ground. But we really got to watch so that if once the cows get the corn picked up and now, they're mostly grazing on the leaves and the stalks that don't have a lot of nutritional value, how are we going to provide an additional protein source? Evaluating what our options are there, whether it's rolling out an alfalfa bale or if we put out mineral tubs, what's the most economical way for us to provide that protein, and energy, and the rest of the vitamins and minerals that those pregnant cows are going to need? So, just make sure that you're thinking all the things through on nutritional values, water availability, fences that are there because this is a resource that we've got several hundreds of acres around that could be utilized by the rancher, and the cow owner, and some advantages to the crop guys as well.

**Madison:**

You're speaking my language, Heather, when you start talking about cattle nutrition. It's something that we definitely have to keep at the forefront of our minds that these cows when they enter that late gestation phase, if they're still out on stocks, they do need that additional protein. Whether that comes through like tub, like you mentioned, alfalfa or even some simple distillers, just making sure that those cows are getting the building blocks they need so that it doesn't affect our calf crop as they come on the ground this spring. I also really liked that you brought up the crop insurance double check on yourself, making sure that you're bringing other people into this conversation, and we're not just running in kind of with our blindfold on and our blinders on the sides of running in and saying this is going to work and maybe not, bringing everyone in on that conversation.

With that, I wanted to thank you, Heather, for joining me on this podcast. I've had a really fun time learning more about how our producers can utilize different management strategies such as cornstalk grazing. I've really enjoyed learning more about the economic decisions that come into making these choices as we move forward, and maybe increasing our profitability and sustainability of our operations. I hope our listeners will take advantage of the information you have shared with us and potentially include them into their operation plans. But with that, 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 next episode, stay curious and keep learning.

**Kiernan Brandt:**

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