

Suggestions and Pointers for New Grazers

June 21, 2017



Fences

Reestablishing fences can be a trial by itself. Property that has not had cattle on it for a number of years could mean that existing fences may be as much as 100 years old. This means brush and trees, both growing and down trees will have completely taken over the old fence line. The old fence may still have some metal or wood posts that may still be found, the wire that was used, whether it was woven wire or barb wire in most cases will be rusted enough that in many cases it will fall apart as it is being rolled up or picked up. This presents another problem that may not show up until a few years later. Cattle may pick up pieces of the wire as they are grazing which will result in “hardware” in the cattle. This will result in the loss of cattle either by dying on the farm or by needing to ship them after they show the symptoms of hardware and before they actually die. My recommendation on this is to place a cow magnet in each animal as a preventative measure. The old wire will continue to show up for years as the cattle graze and regraze areas where fences previously were located.

The next problem in reestablishing fences is the location of the fences. Surveys conducted today will many times mark a line that will be different from where the fence had previously been located. Years ago fences were built with local posts that were not treated with a preservative and as a result were rebuilt as these posts rotted out. In many cases lines were moved if the location was an easier place to put the posts for a fence. Many times around hills or trees, many times changes may have been made which were agreed to by the owners at that time with the old understanding, “my word and your word are good”. These changes many times were not in writing and were not recorded in the Register of Deeds office. Today we have suburban residents who purchase land in the country and have a different view of verbal agreements that were made between previous farm owners. This many times then becomes a battle of contested property boundaries. The issue of “adverse possession” may come into play. This may result in a court battle and could result in boundaries being re-established either where the old fence may have been located or where the new survey indicates the property boundary should be. This can be a time consuming and costly process.

Deciding what to put in for a fence should be the next decision. For a boundary fence, at a minimum, you need to build the fence so it meets the definition of a legal fence. The definition of a legal fence is detailed in Wisconsin Statute 90, The Wisconsin Fence Law. For a boundary fence this would need to be a fence with 4 or more high tensile or barbed wires. Today most fences have been removed, this means that should your animals get out there usually aren’t any other fences to keep them close by. When deciding what to build for a fence you need to consider what animals you will have. For beef animals, cows or horses a high tensile or barbed wire fence will be sufficient. However, if you are planning on having sheep or goats then you should think about using woven wire for your fence. Goats will present a challenge for any type of fence. With a high tensile fence the goats will learn that they are able to simply jump through the fence without receiving any electric shock. A woven wire fence will keep the goats in but will present a challenge if you have goats with horns. The goats will get their heads through the fence to get at the grass on the other side of the fence but then they will be unable to maneuver their heads to allow the horns back through the fence. It also may be a good idea to install at least one

electric wire in front of the woven wire to keep the goats from “climbing the fence” or standing on the wires with their front feet. A woven wire fence that will be used for horses should have an electric wire placed above the woven wire. If this is not done the horses will reach over the fence and gradually bend the wire down towards the ground. If you are in a location where deer are a problem then you need to think about an eight foot woven wire fence. The cost for an eight foot fence will be higher but in the long run it may be a better choice.

Potential problems with fences.

The corner posts need to be sufficiently deep in the ground so the fence will remain tight and the corner posts will not gradually be lifted out of the ground. I would suggest having corner posts placed five feet into the ground. Installation of high tensile fences may be done with posts placed as far as 50 or 60 feet apart. When building high tensile fences fiberglass posts may be used. These offer the benefit of not allowing the electricity to short out into the ground but they do have some shortcomings. When using fiberglass posts on hilly ground they do not have the anchoring ability of metal or wood posts. These posts when placed where the fence is located across a valley or low spot will gradually lift out of the ground. I have seen locations where 3 or 4 posts in a row have lifted and the fence is just bouncing in the air. Another problem with fiberglass posts is that they are not structurally rigid. When these posts are used in areas where the fence goes over a hill they will gradually bend with the wire in the direction of the fence. Another problem that arises from their lack of rigidity may be seen when we have a heavy wet snowfall. This will cause the posts to bend perpendicular to the line of the fence under the weight of snow on the fence. Once this happens the posts are permanently bowed and will not completely straighten back up.

Corner braces, my experience points towards conventional “H” braces as being the most stable and secure for keeping a fence tight. The posts used for ends and corners need to be at least 4 feet and would be better if they were 5 feet in the ground. The diameter of the posts also should be larger than posts used for the rest of the fence.

Floating braces are easier to install, however, the ground end of the brace posts can be pushed off of the stone or end support by cattle. The brace post also will be approximately 10 feet long and will bend and break over time if they are not large enough in diameter.

High tensile fences have the benefit of flexing under down trees and returning to the original height once the tree is removed. Grass or weeds along the fence can result in a lowering of the electric charge on the fence. I would suggest leaving the bottom wire as a ground wire; this will result in being able to keep a higher charge on the rest of the wires in the fence. It also allows the animals to graze under the bottom wire which will help to keep grass and weeds from growing up into the fence and grounding it out. When installing a high tensile fence make all of your fence connections horizontally. Connect all of the bottom wires to all bottom wires and all second wires to all of the other second wires and so on. There may be times such as early in the season when the grass grows tall that you may want to disconnect the second wire to reduce the effect of weeds on your fences’ charge. Have only one location where the hot wires are connected to the line wires. In this way when the snow gets deep in the winter you will be able to disconnect the bottom wire or the second wire by only removing one connection. Install line switches at locations where you will be able to shut off the power to portions of the fence not needed when the cattle are moved into other areas of the farm. Lightning can strike a

fence and blow out your fence charger during summer storms. I have seen a power unit that was blown apart from a lightning strike, so it does happen. Be sure to install a lightning protector to protect your fence charger.

Cattle Lanes

Some people will advise that you don't need cattle lanes if you are doing managed grazing. I will argue that there are places where it is still a good idea to have cattle lanes. There will be times when you will want or need to bring animals up to the barn and it is nice to have a lane to be able to use.

Water Lines for Grazing

Providing water to cattle in each field may be accomplished by using plastic water lines which are available in 300' rolls. The size of the main feed lines will depend on how many cattle you have and how far the individual fields are from the well. In most situations 1¼" plastic water lines will be sufficient to move water out a distance of from ¾ mile to a mile from your well. This will also partially depend on the capacity of your well pump and the size of your pressure tank. When connecting the sections of water line be sure to double band each connection. The plastic lines will expand and contract with changes in temperature and this will occasionally cause the lines to pull apart. This may still happen even if you have double banded the connections. Waterlines for the individual paddocks or pastures will usually be 1" plastic pipe. Most systems use a quick coupler system that allows you to easily connect the sections of plastic pipe and allows for moving your waterer on a frequent, perhaps daily basis. If you don't need to move the waterer each day you should still check it each day. Cattle may step on the hose and completely break the hose from the waterer, they may push the tank around and pinch the hose which will cut off the water, they may stand next to the tank and leave a deposit in the tank which will mean they won't drink at all, they may also step on or bump the quick coupler and cause it to disconnect. When you first put in your water lines they will be easy to see, however after a couple years grass will grow over the lines and the connections will be covered up. I suggest using some way to mark where each of the connections are. I use a style of fiberglass electric fence posts that I don't use for my cross fencing. Use one type of posts to mark where the quick coupler connectors are for your water system and use another type of post to mark where the 1¼ line connectors are. This will allow you to easily check the waterline in the middle of the night when you hear the water pump continually going on and off. For most grazing systems you will use a small movable water tank. This in many cases will be half of a plastic 55 gallon barrel with a high flow float controlled water valve installed towards the bottom of the barrel. This will be connected by a garden hose to a connector that will snap into the quick coupler in the water line. This type of system should handle close to 50 animals. One question when setting up a water system is where to place the quick couplers. My suggestion is to simply run the 300 foot roll of plastic along the side of the pasture and use a quick coupler at the end of each roll to connect to the next roll. Since the rolls are 300 feet long you will be able to break your pasture into 150 foot sections and access water from each coupler for two sections. I would suggest at the entrance into the field to place a coupler about 30 feet or so into the field, simply cut the first roll of plastic water line at about 30 feet and stick in a quick coupler. Should you decide later that you need any couplers closer than 300' you can simply cut the line and put in a new coupler.

Use of larger paddocks and less frequent moving of cattle results in more cow paths which increases erosion.

Moving Cattle

Beef cattle learn to follow you. Rather than drive them like you do when you go out and get the dairy herd you have to train the beef animals to follow. They will learn that when you call them that means fresh grass. You can train them to take treats, half cobs of corn from a bucket, then they will follow you. You also need to think about six steps ahead, similar to playing chess, so that when you need to have them move into the barnyard they will be right next door. Another challenge is baby calves. The calves will hide in the grass, like a deer, if you move the herd, the calf will not know where, the calf will not drive, it will return to the place mom left it, so move only a short distance at a time, and check to see that the young calves also moved. When moving around a fence from pasture to pasture it is best to set up a short polywire 30 or 40 yards into the new pasture, this will reduce the chance that some animals will remain along the fence in the old pasture.

Moving cattle across roads can be a challenge today as we have more rural non-farmers who are unaware of the law giving cattle the right of way over vehicles. After having issues with vehicles who refuse to stop when moving cattle across the road I now place a vehicle across the road on either side of where the cattle will be crossing. This has been effective in stopping traffic.

Barnyard fences and handling facilities

As you move the cattle into a continually smaller yard or holding area you will need to have continually taller and stronger fencing. A headgate should be an essential addition onsite to allow the handling of cattle for vaccinations, attaching ear tags etc. Many veterinarians today will not provide service if there is insufficient facilities for safely catching and holding cattle. A cattle handling tub and a scale are nice to have but not absolutely essential. In your planning for handling cattle have gates installed that will allow for the movement of cattle into various pens. This may include gates that will swing both ways past a center fence or it may mean the installation of a stub gate to allow a 45 degree gate at a fence corner. You may want calves separated, pregnant cows separated, cows needing further care separated or a combination.

Time of the year for calving.

There are advantages and disadvantages for having calves early and for having calves later in the season. Look at these advantages and disadvantages and use a time of year that fits you and your farm. Early calving can result in issues with snow and cold. A small trailer to bring calves to the barn is nice to have. A trailer needs to have sides so the cow can see the calf but so the calf cannot stand up and get out. Also some type of warming box can be a good investment. Having calves early allows most of the cows to freshen before the cows are put on pasture. This reduces possible issues from coyotes or other animals. It is easier to check on cows twice a day when they are still confined and being fed hay.

Later dates for calving removes the issue of snow and cold.

Kenneth Williams, Professor
UW-Extension Agriculture Agent

University of Wisconsin
Waushara County
PO Box 487
Wautoma WI 54982
[920-787-0416](tel:920-787-0416)
ken.williams@ces.uwex.edu

Ken Williams has been grazing a cow-calf beef operation using rotational grazing for ten years on 120 acres in Waushara County WI.