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Meat and milk production on irrigated birdsfoot trefoil pastures in the Mountain West USA

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Introduction
Irrigated birdsfoot trefoil (BFT; Lotus corniculatus L.) is a productive, persistent perennial legume in the Mountain West region of the United States of America (USA) (MacAdam and Griggs 2006). It does not cause bloat, even when grazed in pure stands, because it contains a relatively small amount (2-4% of dry matter (DM)) of condensed tannins (Mueller-Harvey 2006; Waghorn 2008). Birdsfoot trefoil tannins bind excess plant proteins at rumen pH (~ pH 6.2) sufficiently to prevent bloat and then release these proteins into the abomasum at gastric pH (~ pH 2.5). This allows plant proteins to be digested to amino acids that can be absorbed in the small intestines (Waghorn et al. 1987).

Short-term increases in productivity have been demonstrated in beef cattle (Wen et al. 2002) and dairy cows (Woodward et al. 1999) grazing BFT, but few studies have looked at longer-term effects on commercial farms.

This study investigated the rate of season-long average daily liveweight gain and meat quality of cattle (MacAdam et al. 2011) and the intake and milk production of dairy cattle grazing pure stands of BFT on commercial farms during the summer grazing period of 2012.

Material and methods
Beef cattle production
Cattle and grazing details are shown in Table 1. Flood-irrigated pastures were seeded with BFT cv. Norcen in August 2011. Data are presented for 2012. Nine dairy cows rotationally grazed for 10 weeks on either a BFT or grass-based pasture, comprised of Lolium perenne, Dactylis glomerata, Schedonorus arundinaceus, Elymus repens and Trifolium repens. Cows were fed 2.27 kg of barley with a vitamin and mineral supplement and moved to fresh paddocks after each milking (every 12 hours). Intake was determined as the difference between pre-grazing and post-grazing DM with a rising plate meter. Milk production was measured at the beginning of the study and every 2 weeks, by collecting milk from each cow at 4 successive (2 morning and 2 evening) milkings.

Results and Discussion
Beef cattle production
Results from the beef producers’ cattle are reported in Table 1. The relatively low stocking rate of the Morgan Co. producer’s fall-born cattle resulted in under-
utilization of the forage produced, whereas the high stocking rate of the Box Elder Co. producer’s yearling cattle resulted in good forage utilization. The average daily gains from the more intensively stocked pastures approached those expected from grain finishing (1.65 kg/day). Steaks from the 2 cattle finished on the BFT pasture were graded ‘high select’ and considered by the consumer panel to be either equal to or preferred to grain-finished steaks. Both BFT- and grain-finished steaks were preferred to steaks from organic grass-finished cattle for most traits.

Dairy production

Intake of dairy cows grazing BFT in mid-summer was higher than for cows grazing grass pasture (Fig. 1A), resulting in higher milk production for cows fed BFT than grass (Fig. 1B).

Conclusion

We have demonstrated that the production increases found in controlled studies can be achieved by producers managing their cattle within the constraints of a working farm or ranch. Birdsfoot trefoil has the potential to be an alternative beef finishing system and is an excellent mid-summer dairy pasture.

References


