

“The Power of One Wire”

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The tools to improve productivity that farmers and ranchers have at their disposal are quite astonishing. Computers that allow us to analyze our operations, equipment used to plant/harvest crops to produce feed, and the genetic predictions used to select better livestock are just a few examples of tools that have changed livestock production. As managers we must determine which tools to incorporate into our farms and some will prove to be useful while others will be discarded.

In grassland agriculture it is difficult to ignore the value of temporary electric fence. Reels, poly-wire and tread-in posts coupled with a good energizer allow graziers to more actively manage their pastures. However, like with most technology getting started can be a challenge. Even the most advanced graziers started with a single strand (or 2-3 strands for small ruminants) subdividing a permanent pasture at the water source, and all additional improvements in your grazing management journey depend on **"the power of one wire"**.

So, what benefits does adaptive grazing management using smaller paddocks and more frequent movement have on the system? We know that when we only graze for a few days and then rest the grass for a long period the grass stand is healthier and will produce more total forage. Furthermore, this approach alters the grazing behavior of the livestock making them less selective and improve the amount of grass consumed rather than wasted. These and other benefits are well documented, and it is all because of the effective use of temporary electric fence. However, many producers do not fully realize the numerous advantages of using this technology.

So, what are some of the benefits you can expect if you adopt temporary fencing? First, using temporary electric fence gives you the opportunity to observe your livestock as they move to new grass. Cattle producers can use this time to check body condition, udder, feet and leg soundness and fly populations. What about that cow that is moving slowly? You can clearly observe how she walks and determine if she needs treatment for foot rot or needs to be added to the cull list due to age or some other unsoundness. Most all of these items fall into the NC Beef Quality Assurance program and will allow producers to effectively monitor their herd and provide for their welfare in a timely manner. Furthermore, moving cattle more frequently will improve their disposition and make them easier to handle. Just moving them one to two times weekly can make a big impact as they will learn you most often are there to give them better grass, and they become accustomed to being near you and walking by you without being afraid.

As cattle become familiar with this new management style they are also learning to respect poly-wire and it becomes a powerful psychological barrier. They are content to graze their forage allowance knowing you will return to give them new grass soon. The respect for temporary electric fence also allows it to be used to construct short-term lanes for cattle movement. On many occasions producers must move cattle across pastures without grazing them and a poly-wire lane will keep the cattle going the right direction.

Cattle that are well trained can also be pressured and moved by the use of poly-wire. If you are alone and need to get up a group or an individual animal, you can hook the end of the poly-wire to the gate, and use the poly-wire to direct cattle where you want them to go. You can literally "reel them in"! If you have help, two people holding a long section of poly-wire between them can easily move cattle where you want them to go. This can be helpful when moving cattle from large pastures into lanes or holding pens. In some cases with larger herds, three or more people can spread out and carry the same poly-wire to gently apply pressure to move cattle in the desired direction like a moving fence. It is truly amazing to watch the cattle avoid the poly-wire and flinch when it touches them even though it has no power on it!

In addition, this technique can be used to sort off cattle without gathering the whole herd. Imagine sorting off a group of late calving bred cows from a herd of cow-calf pairs. Moving the entire herd through the corral could risk calf injury. With cows that respect poly-wire and low stress handling you can move them to a different pasture for closer observation while the pairs remain relaxed. Furthermore, those later born calves could have significant scour risk if they stay with the older calves. Also, if you have a cow with pinkeye or foot rot, you can use the poly-wire herding technique to cut them out and get them to the pen without having to gather the whole herd. These are more examples of how "the power of one wire" can impact Beef Quality Assurance.

Temporary electric fence can also be used to exclude cattle from heavily impacted areas that need rest or protection. Many pastures have limited shade to aid in cattle comfort during the summer's heat. Even in very large wooded areas cattle will find a preferred location and use it repeatedly. They may continue to use these sites during the winter. These areas will become degraded with excess nutrients, excessive mud, soil compaction/erosion and over time the trees may die. Some progressive graziers use temporary electric fence to subdivide their wooded tracts to prevent this occurrence by rotating/resting their shade. The fence is easy to construct and relocate as management opportunities change. A ruptured waterline or an overturned water tank can cause quite a mess and cattle would love use this area to cool themselves. A section of poly-wire can offer protection while this area stabilizes.

Frequently, severe thunderstorms, tornados or tropical storm systems can knock down trees and damage perimeter fences, requiring a quick response from the farmer when they may have much larger problems to deal with. If your animals are trained to temporary electric fence, you can use those supplies to quickly reestablish the perimeter until permanent repairs can be made.

We certainly use a variety of tools in livestock production. Some are very complex while others are quite simple. On the quest for continual improvement we must adopt technologies (tools) that move us forward. On our home farms it is difficult for us to imagine raising livestock without temporary electric fence. It is a tool that delivered a "breakthrough moment" and fundamentally changed our program. But it all started with "one wire" dividing a pasture in half and that's why it is called ***"The Power of One Wire"***. However, like all technology there is a learning curve and points of frustration. Don't give up! Stay the course and learn how to use this valuable tool. It changed everything we do and made our farms more productive and pleasurable. Are you ready to give it a try and take the "One Wire Challenge"? Join us at an Amazing Grazing Workshop soon to learn more about how to get started reaping the benefits of ***"The Power of One Wire"***!

Note: The concepts discussed in this article will work for all types of grazing livestock but beef cattle were used in the examples to simplify the discussion.