

# Rye grass fits well between cash grain crops

By Doug Rich

“My goal was to find a way to get additional feed, still maintain our cash crops and utilize our resources,” says Bob Mack.

Mack, a Watertown, SD, farmer-feeder, says there is about a month in the spring when it is too wet to work the fields, but there is adequate sunshine for good growing conditions. “We need to use our resources which are the sun and the soil,” he says.

About 15 years ago, Mack began planting oats as early as he could in the spring to take advantage of the sun, soil and moisture available during that time. “We would then hay the oats off and plant buckwheat,” he says. “That did not work too bad, but there were times we had problems getting the hay put up. Yields were good. We produced substantial amounts of feed that could be utilized by the feeder cattle and stock cattle.”

After a few years planting oats, Mack began to look for a way to get the same amount of feed, but with less mechanical harvesting.

“I drew on things that my grandfather had told me years ago, as well as the time I spent in the South where they graze rye,” says Mack. He worked as a salesman for a feed company and learned from their nutritionists, also.

“We have a lot of small fields that we have spread with manure every other year for several years,” says Mack. “The ground is very rich and requires very little to produce a crop, but small grains lodge. I was looking for a way to use more of the nutrients in the soil.”

**The solution** to his problem was to plant rye after the fall harvest of corn and soybeans.

“Here, by the end of May, rye is shoulder high and totally headed out,” says Mack. “It has produced more dry matter by the first of June than our pasture will produce in an entire season. We can graze it intensively, and still go back and raise a cash grain crop.” Mack has even cut the rye for grain. “Two years ago, I grazed it out, pulled the cattle off the first week of June and then let it come back as grain. After grazing it for six weeks, he still harvested 55 bushels of rye seed per acre.

“Rye grass gives us early spring grazing, when we need it, and it also gives those warm season pastures a chance to get their full growth before we turn cattle out on them,” says Mack.

Depending on when the rye was seeded, Mack is able to turn cows out in early April, while most cows in his area are not turned out on pasture until around May 10. “Our cows get two months of feed when their nutritional needs are the highest, right at calving and right after calving. The cows, which calf in April, have good feed during peak milk production and then are flushed right ahead of breeding back. It has worked out exceptionally well,” he says.

“The big challenge with rye is it grows fast and needs to be grazed hard,” says Mack. “We need to stay ahead of it,

“

*The big challenge with rye is it grows fast and needs to be grazed hard. We need to stay ahead of it, so it stays in the active growth stage where it has the most nutritional value.*

*-Bob Mack,  
Watertown, SD*

”

so it stays in the active growth stage where it has the most nutritional value.” Last year, he ran 64 pairs on 35 acres for 65 days. “If it does get ahead of us, we can take some out and plant it to corn.”

Normally, the first field of rye to be plowed up in the spring is planted to silage corn around the first of June. All of his corn crop is fed back to cattle as high moisture grain or silage. The second field to be grazed out is planted to soybeans. “Fields grazed out in July are worked up and seeded to buckwheat. It works well late and does not take a lot of moisture.

“Last year, we never got a decent rain on the buckwheat after we seeded it and it still yielded 780 pounds and acre,” says Mack. “It netted out better than soybeans, and we did not have the input costs.” Mack says they have a good local market for buckwheat.

**Although the** rye grass is used primarily for the cow herd, Mack has run stocker cattle on it for short periods of time until he can move them into his feedlot. Last year, he ran 78 head of feeder calves on 17 acres for 47 days. They gained 2.96 pounds a day. “These were salebarn cattle, so some of that was compensatory gain,” says Mack. “They performed well and it was a good place to hold them. They were out of the mud.” Mack estimated that he produced 240 to 250 pounds of beef per acre off that patch of rye. He markets 500 to 800 head of finished cattle every year.

Mack still is experimenting with his crop rotation. “I would like to follow rye with milo sometime,” he says. “Milo is not a water intensive crop, it can be planted later in the growing season, and still make a cash crop or feed crop. The stubble can be use for grazing, also.”

**Because he** can run more numbers on fewer acres, Mack has been able to expand his cow herd without investing in more acres. “I wanted to increase the cow herd numbers, but, at the same time, I was limited by the amount of available pasture in the area and I did not want to ship them to pastures 30 to 40 miles away,” says Mack. By using the rye grass, he has reduced the stocking rate on his farm, from four to five acres per cow-calf pair to around two acres per pair, which made it possible to increase cow numbers.

Grazing rye in the spring between grain crops has been a low cost, high production system for Mack. “When we dollar out the cost, it is a pretty good way to go.” he says.