Livingston Parish cattleman David Easterly stands with his Gelbvieh heifers, which he grazes on rich diet of rye grass a few hours every day.

**Grazing method utilizes forage effectively**

By DICK WRIGHT

Advocate staff writer

Jack Cutshall, range conservationist, says rotational or short-duration grazing for cattle is inspired by the ways of the buffalo of the Old West.

Cutshall described the advantages of short-duration grazing to about 90 cattle owners and others at a field day recently at David Easterly's farm north of Watson.

"We're really doing what buffalo used to do on the plains," Cutshall said.

Buffalo looked for the best grass, grazed it, and moved on, he said.

Cattle owners who use short-duration grazing move their cattle to different blocks of a pasture to take advantage of the best grass.

As Cutshall spoke, he stood knee deep in a rich growth of dark green Marshall rye grass. Easterly planted the rye grass last year and put cattle on it in December. The pasture is fenced into blocks. The cattle are grazed on a block a few hours every day for a period of time and then moved to a fresh block.

The field day was held to show off a Soil Conservation Service demonstration installed on the Easterly cattle farm. Behind Cutshall as he spoke, 40 of Easterly’s brown heifers of the Gelbvieh breed and three older Gelbviehs grazed on a block of the rye grass pasture, kept there by a strand of electrified wire.

Easterly planted 23 acres of pasture in rye grass and divided it into six “cells,” each fenced off by electrified wire. He puts the heifers into one of the blocks every day for three hours and lets them graze. When they graze down the grass in a cell, he moves them to a new block. After their daily grazing period, the cattle are herded back to regular pasture where they get roughage and mineral supplements. The Gelbvieh heifers rotate through four blocks. A herd of other, non-purebred cattle are grazed on two blocks.

"This is my first time to do it," Easterly said.

He said short-duration grazing lets him graze more cattle on less space and save money in seeding pastures.

There are other benefits. Conservationists have said the cattle don't graze the grass too short, and they don't stomp it down as much as they would if they were left on the same pasture. Moving cows to different grazing plots also distributes the manure and, according to conservationists, recycles it quicker.

Cutshall said in an interview better forage has soil and water conservation payoffs.

"Basically what we look at by improving the management..."
of forage plants is we maintain better plant cover on the ground. Better plant cover means fewer problems with soil erosion and water quality,” he said.

“With intensive grazing we find we have a need for less fertilizer,” Cutshall said. “The manure is recycled faster on higher-quality forage into soil and into plants than if there would be continuous grazing because the animal does a better job of digesting plants if there is less fiber. Tender vegetation is less fibrous.”

Rotating cattle from pasture to pasture for more efficient grazing is not new, Cutshall said, but newer and cheaper kinds of fencing have now made it more attractive to cattle owners.

“Modern-day rotational grazing has gained new emphasis primarily due to the advent of more effective electrical fencing systems,” he said.

Electrical fencing is much cheaper than stringing barbed wire, Cutshall said.

Robert Vernon, district conservationist, said materials to fence the pasture on Easterly’s farm and section it off into grazing blocks cost $339.

The Capital Soil and Water Conservation District matched a $500 state Soil and Water Conservation Committee grant to set up two demonstrations of rotational grazing. One was put on Easterly’s beef cattle farm. The other was installed at Donald Herring’s dairy farm. Both farms are in Livingston Parish.

“The key we’re trying to sell here is management and better utilization of forage,” Vernon said.

The Soil and Water Conservation District can provide other cattle farmers with technical assistance if they want to try short-duration grazing, he said.

The Easterly farm demonstration was built around a winter grass with high protein content, Vernon said.

“We’re currently working with Southern University to put in permanent grass over there,” he said.

“This system we had on the Easterly farm was for using rye grass as protein supplement for winter grazing,” Vernon said. “That is a lush grazing forage, high in protein,” he said.

Warm season grasses are higher in fiber and it takes longer grazing to meet a cow’s nutritional needs, so she is left on the grazing block longer than cattle on winter grazing, he said.