

June 11, 2008, Bison News Article, by Tom Barthel WC 635

Welcome to spring, late spring, early summer or whatever you choose to call the weather. As I write this in early June, it is finally warming up and we have been getting adequate rain. The pastures are now catching up on the season despite a slow and late start. It has been so dry for us in recent years that I had almost forgotten how quickly and beautifully grass can grow. What a thrill. I hope the weather holds and the price of winter hay eases up.

We winter our bison herd in a 20-acre pasture that is half wooded with a stream running through it. By spring the area where we feed hay has manure about a foot deep and a mound of wasted hay at the site of each metal feed ring.

You might recall the speaker on holistic farming, Joel Saladin, who addressed us at our 2007 meeting in Morton. He had a lot of interesting ideas, but many did not apply well to bison raisers. The one idea that clicked the best with me was his suggestion of raising a few hogs on the site of winter-feeding. We tried it last year and it worked out well. Pretty much the way he said it should.

I know this won't fit for most of you but it might work for a few. You have to like hogs and I do. I always have. Not in close confinement but in larger lots where it is ok for them to root and do the things hogs do.

Of course it probably helps that we have a ready market for hogs by the half. Last year we raised three, this year six. All of our sales, bison beef and pork are farm gate sales so the hogs are a simple addition in a marketing sense. We sell the hogs to folks who already buy bison or beef from us. Last year's customers all reordered and new customers have appeared such that we are just about sold out. That is for hogs that I intend to harvest in November. Even at a premium price, there is not a lot of money in a few hogs but they fit in nicely and every little bit helps.

It takes a couple hours to build an electric fence around the feed area. Saladin suggested two wires, one at about 8 inches and the second at 18. I condition the hogs to an electric wire by installing a short section in the smaller pen that I put them in when I first bring them home.

They need water, a little soybean meal, salt and mineral. In addition to that I throw cob corn over the fence from time to time. They'll find it. The hogs spend every day turning over that manure. By fall when they are much bigger, the feed area is a nice crumbly organic material suitable for spreading on pastures gardens or flowerbeds. No flies or odor.

The hogs needed about a month on mostly corn to finish at 300 pounds. The meat was delicious and much less fatty than conventionally raised pork.

There is a certain bonus in that all your organic material such as garden or table scraps grass clippings etc. can be "thrown to the hogs". We're all getting more and more into recycling.

An added bonus for us was that people who came to our farm to see bison and horses (we do tours) got a lot of enjoyment out of seeing the happiest hogs in the world.

I hope this is useful to some of you. I still don't know enough about bison to give you advice on them but I'm learning.

Best regards and I hope your summer weather is near perfect.