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COMMUNITY

Through the next five, frigid months the Newhall's are growing summer greens

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KITTITAS COUNTY – Farm fields are quietly waiting for blankets of snow and the promise of a deep sleep through winter, but atop the ridge above Thorp at Ellensburg's Windy N Ranch, Brad Newhall is planting and harvesting inside an insulated shipping container – a cycle that defies the will of Old Man Winter.

As he explained, “By growing and harvesting our own fodder we're able to butcher animals throughout the year.

“Anyone raising grass-fed, grass-finished animals, in fact anyone who raises animals for marketable meat knows you have to slaughter when they're on the gain, when they're gaining weight in late summer and fall.

“You can't get animals to gain weight in winter unless you feed them grain. That's because though baled hay is adequate nutrition it doesn't provide the explosive growth it pro-

vides in the summertime. Baled hay is dry and the animals are only able to absorb roughly 30% of the available nutrients. So with a hay-only diet you're not getting the kind of growth that really puts the fat on.

“As a supplement, fodder provides the animal with 80% of its available nutrients because it's a new, fragile vegetation, very easy to break down.”

Newhall cautioned that a fodder-only diet isn't healthy.

“Fodder provides too many nutrients and goes through animals like a milkshake.

“There's nothing to really slow it down. By comparison, if you were on a liquid diet, healthy smoothies, say, you might get great nutrients but you'd need fiber to allow your intestines to absorb it all.

“So what I do is a mix: 60-70% hay and 30% fodder. Works great and it's better for the animal in that they are still consuming grass.”

The harvest cycle

When the fodder growing in Newhall's insulated ship-

ping container is in full swing he harvests about a half ton a day, though he said there's a lot of water weight that goes along with that.

“We have about 430 trays in the container, each yielding 13 to 14 pounds of fodder per tray.

“When we start production we put about 72 trays on the racks the first day. The second day we put another 72 and so on until the sixth day when we harvest the first day's fodder and start with another 72 seeded trays at the back of the line.

“For the next five months of winter we'll cycle the 430 trays about 25 times.

“It takes an hour or so to rotate trays daily.”

He said the priority for feeding fodder to his herd of cattle, for instance, is based on a tagging system. The first calf born in the year would be tagged 01-17, the second 02-17 and so on.

“By doing that it becomes very easy to segregate out the eldest in the herd by picking the lowest number. Those would be the ones up next for slaughter.”

To make it work

Newhall said the trick with growing fodder in a shipping container through the frigid months of the year is managing temperature and humidity.

“The goal is to get dry seeds ready-to-feed in six days. If you're off on temperature and humidity, you're going to be losing much of that growth. So in the beginning there was a lot of trial and error, but we've done our research, much of it in Australia where fodder growing is more prolific. Why Australia?”

“Australians have to deal with their country's arid climate. Over time they've discovered they can raise cattle in the desert with fodder grown in just a handful of shipping containers.”

He said water runoff inside the container is recyclable – another advantage with this kind of system.

“You can collect runoff, filter it and then reuse it. That way you conserve water usage, or you can use the runoff (packed with nutrients) for gardens or projects involving hydroponics.”



BRAD NEWHALL readies to remove his daily, winter harvest of fodder from an insulated shipping container. Courtesy Windy N Ranch

About the seed

The fodder Newhall is growing comes from two types of seeds: barley and triticale, a hybrid of wheat.

Windy N Ranch

Newhall said the ranch is home to 450 calves and

yearlings.

“We butcher about 110 animals a year. Next year 140 or so, that includes grass-fed calves and yearlings, lambs and goats. In winter we feed them all with fodder and hay.”