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A voluntary partnership with private landowners

Year-Round Grazing Offers Real Potential

by Luke Hunter, NRCS, Ripley, West Virginia

With a focused grazing management plan, this West Virginia beef producer found a way to make year-round grazing a reality.

"WOW, I did it!" Those are the thoughts of Bill West (pictured above), a Jackson County, West Virginia, beef producer who successfully implemented a year-round grazing plan on his farm. As a result, West was pleased to report no feed bill, no open cows, and no manure hauling – all of which equals fewer worries and more profits, according to West.

After experimenting with many different winter feeding systems for his 150 head crossbred beef cattle herd, West did something most of us in the beef industry only talk about. He wintered part of his cowherd with no outside feed inputs. No hay, no soybean hulls, no lick tanks, no cultivated fall crop, no range cubes, no over seeding, no turnips (get the point?) - only existing forages growing in the fields were used.

He was able to pasture 15 cows with calves and one bull from April 2000 to January 2002 - 20 months - without any supplemental feed. Yes, most of us in the beef industry read these articles with skepticism and try to critique them as to why it wouldn't work for our operation, but this is the real deal.

West leases a 175-acre farm, consisting of 54 acres of open grassland and 121 acres of woodland. The soil type on the 54 acres of grassland is rated as having good grassland potential and is evenly divided into 27 acres of ridge top/hillside and 27 acres of bottomland. The ridge top/hillside is divided into two separate fields and the bottomland is divided into four fields. Tall fescue is the predominant grass species with significant amounts of bluegrass, white clover and orchard grass.

West applied 200 pounds of 18-46-0 per acre on March 15, 2000 to the 27 acres of bottomland, which was 36 pounds of actual nitrogen per acre. No lime was applied as soil test results indicated the pH to be 6.1. These bottomland fields have been in long term pasture and hay (grassland) for the previous ten years with no flooding.

To handle the spring flush of grass, five cows with calves were added April 1, 2000 to the fifteen already present, and removed September 15, 2000. The herd was moved from one field to the next every seven days. West admits, "I know this is not the ideal way to do it, but it fit my schedule. I got into the routine of moving this group of cows every Sunday morning."

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By Luke Hunter, Soil Conservationist, NRCS, Ripley, WV

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Hindsville, Arkansas

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Cover photograph:
Bill West has used extended grazing to put money in his pocket. Pictured is Mr. West with some of his cattle.
Photo by Luke Hunter.

Year-Round Grazing Offers Real Potential

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On July 20, 2000, hay was harvested from the 27 acres of bottomland. West said, "I saw there was too much wasted grass in these fields and the cows were not eating it. Since I was done with the rest of my hay, I made this hay in case I needed it." Approximately twenty-nine tons of hay were harvested at this time from this area (1.09 tons per acre). After three weeks cattle were then rotated back into part of this area and the rotation continued.

This rotation continued all winter, spring, summer and into fall 2001 with no supplemental feeding, additional inputs or soil amendments.

In mid-March 2001, West asked Extension educator Ed Smolder to come and body condition score (BCS) his cows. After looking at the cattle, Smolder simply said, "Don't worry - the cows have a BCS of five or better, so hang in there."

The results proved Smolder correct. West had a 100 % calf crop in 2001, and these calves were an average of 14 pounds heavier at sale time than calves in 2000 (568 lbs. in 2001, 554 lbs. in 2000). More importantly, when cows were pregnancy checked in November 2001, every cow had bred and had a BCS of 6 or higher.

There were natural resource benefits as well, including reduced concentrations of livestock waste, the elimination of manure loading, handling and spreading, and less chance of polluted runoff.

Extended grazing means a lot of different things to a lot of different people. To West it means money in his pocket. But, West realizes that while this scenario worked for him, "everyone's situation is different so what works in one locale or operation may not necessarily work in another." He adds, "When the lean times return to the cow-calf business, I plan on selling down my herd and using more year-round grazing."

Over the past ten years West has asked for advice and received support from the Western Soil Conservation District (WSCD), the West Virginia University Cooperative Extension Service (CES) local Agent Ed Smolder, and most recently Jonathan Cummings, Grassland Technician, WV State Conservation Agency (WVSCA).

About the author: Luke Hunter is a soil conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Ripley, WV. He has shared Bill West's grazing success story with BEEF magazine, the Stockman Grass Farmer and several other publications. ■

COST OF WINTER FEEDING (1999-2000)

Winter Feeding Period (Nov.15th- April 15th) with 15 cows

Item	Qty	Units	Price/Unit	Expense
Hay	140	rolls	$ 20.00	$ 2,800.00
Property Rental	1	year	$600.00	$ 250.00
Minerals	500	lbs.	$ 00.12	$ 60.00
Labor with tractor to feed - 1/3 hr/day	50	hrs.	$ 25.00	$ 1,250.00
Labor with Tractor Spring Cleanup	10	hrs.	$ 25.00	$ 250.00

Total Average Winter Feeding Costs (Previous Year) $ 4,610.00
Cost per Cow for 15 cows $ 307.00
Cost per cow per day for 150 day period $ 2.05

COST OF WINTER FEEDING (2000-2001)

Winter Feeding Period (Nov.15th- April 15th) with 15 cows

Item	Qty	Units	Price/Unit	Expense
Property Rental	1	year	$600.00	$ 250.00
Minerals	500	lbs.	$ 00.12	$ 60.00
Labor during grazing period	21	hrs.	$ 8.00	$ 168.00
Fertilizer Materials	2.6	tons	$223.00	$ 580.00
Fertilizer Spreading with Tractor	2	hrs.	$ 25.00	$ 50.00

Total Average Winter Feeding Costs (2000-2001) $ 1,108.00
Cost per Cow for 15 cows $ 74.00
Cost per cow per day for 150 day period $ .49

GRAZING EVENTS

NEW YORK HOSTS EMPIRE STATE PASTURE DAY

In August, over 250 people from eight states and another continent participated in the first Empire State Pasture Day hosted by dairy farmers John and Cathy Burgett of Tully, NY. Demonstrations were given on topics including electric high-tensile fence installation, no-till seeding, pasture irrigation equipment, pasture clipping, livestock herding with dogs, weed and forage species identification, pasture quality and quantity estimation, livestock water dispensing options, fence energizer grounding, soil quality evaluation, and mobile processing unit. Many agencies, organizations, and businesses were on hand to illustrate their programs, products, or services relating to some facet of grass-based agriculture.

Presentations by university researchers Dr. Larry Muller, Dr. Harold Harpster, and Dr. Steve Washburn were provided on feeding the grazing dairy cow, multiple species grazing, and seasonal calving and cross-breeding, respectively. A panel of members of the Northeast Organic Dairy Producers covered issues including transitioning, milk marketing, and raising calves. In addition, John Burgett shared his perspectives on grazing his dairy herd based on his own experiences and knowledge gained.

Various dignitaries were on hand to support the event. Nathan Rudgers, Commissioner of the NYS Dept. of Agriculture & Markets, presented a certificate of appreciation to the Burgett family for their conservation stewardship in grazing and hosting this educational event for other interested producers. Paul Baker of NYS Senator Nancy-Lorraine Hoffman's office shared the Senator's praise of conservation practices like grazing that enhance the environmental compatibility and economic viability of agriculture throughout the state. Joe DelVecchio, NY State Conservationist for USDA-NRCS, alerted the audience of an award originally bestowed to William Tracey of Auburn, NY in July in Washington, D.C. for his service as a board member representing the National Association of Conservation Districts on the National GLCI Steering Committee.

During the event, Jana Malot, Northeast Region GLCI Coordinator, contributed her views and hopes of advances in grazing for farms in this portion of the U.S. She has just recently been appointed to her coordinator position and says she looks forward to assisting and fostering appropriate adoption of grazing throughout the Northeastern US.

For more information about this event contact Dan Vredenburgh, Broome County Soil & Water Conservation District, at 607-724-9268, extension 8. ■

Submitted by Robert DeClue, Area Grazing Lands Mgmt. Specialist, New York State Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR

The Georgia Grazing Lands Conservation Coalition (GGLCC) will host its third Statewide Forage Conference on **Tuesday, December 10**. The one-day conference will be held at the University of Georgia's new livestock arena on South Milledge Avenue in Athens. Jim Gerrish, who is known for his work at the University of Missouri's Forage Systems Research Center, will be the keynote speaker. In addition, prominent specialists working in Georgia will make presentations on weed management, developing cow-calf budgets, nutrient management and water quality challenges, and how to get premiums and avoid discounts in the beef cattle marketplace. An 'Ask the Experts' session will allow participants to ask qualified speakers specific questions of concern to them. Look for the conference registration form on the GGLCC website (http://www.ga.nrcs.usda.gov/gatechnical/gglcc/gglcc.html), or for more information contact Holli Kuykendall, GGLCC Recording Secretary, at (706) 546-2095. ■

GLCI SPOTLIGHT

American Forage and Grassland Council

by Kindra Gordon

The American Forage and Grassland Council (AFGC) is an international organization with nearly 4,000 members in the United States and Canada. Much like GLCI, the group's primary objective is to promote the profitable production and sustainable utilization of quality forage and grasslands.

As its mission, AFGC aspires to be the "leader and voice of economically and environmentally sound forage focused agriculture." The AFGC has two voices representing them on the National GLCI Steering Committee – John Spain, a beef producer from Hindsville, AR, and Dave Forgey, a dairy producer near Logansport, IN.

A PASTURE-BASED DAIRYMAN

The Forgeys

Dave Forgey is a lifelong dairyman. He worked with both his father and grandfather on the family dairy farm in Indiana, and since 1966, he and his wife Helen have operated Forgey's River-View Farm along the Wabash River, west of Logansport, IN.

Despite their long history in the dairy industry, in 1991 the Forgeys made the decision to change their conventional operation to a pasture-based, seasonal dairy. Patterned after New Zealand dairy farms, the Forgeys graze their 150 head herd on 400 grazeable acres that are divided into an intensive grazing system. The herd is dried off on Dec. 24 through about March 1, when calving begins. After a freshening period, milking resumes.

The Forgeys have found success with their switch. "In 1991 my wife and I were in serious financial condition, but over the years as a pasture based dairy, we have become profitable," Dave says. Next year they even have plans to grow the herd to about 200 head with the replacement heifers they raise. "One of the things about a seasonal dairy is that you don't stress the cows as much, so there is a low cull rate. We've got the grass and the heifers, so we're going to grow to capacity," Dave says.

In 1991, the Forgeys made another change, they brought a young couple, Scott and Darla Foerg, into the operation first as employees and by 1998 as partners. The young couple has purchased 20% of the herd and are responsible for the milking. Dave says he felt it was important to help others get started in the industry.

Over the years, Dave, who says he has "always been forage oriented," has been involved with the Indiana Forage & Grassland Council and served as state president in '91-'92. He currently serves as a producer board member with AFGC. Dave has also been supportive of GLCI and is on his state's GLCI board.

Forgey also dedicates time to being a spokesperson for grazing. "I feel it's important to share what we've done and the successes we've had on our own farm." He has traveled to the Ukraine to teach grazing seminars and hosts The Forgey Files on his website www.carlnet.org/~forgraze. These are articles he has written to help educate beginning graziers. Forgey also shares his experiences in bringing on a young partner because he believes it's vitally important to show others how to bring young people into the ag industry.

Of GLCI, he says, "It's having some inroads especially in putting grazing specialists in states. But we've still got a lot of work to do…both on the state and national level."

He believes the biggest challenge is to garner more government funding for grazing projects. "That funding still traditionally goes to row crops. A lot of people still don't realize the benefits from grazing," he says.

REPRESENTING VIEWS OF THE SMALL FARMER

After 21 years of service in the Air Force, **John Spain** retired from active duty in 1975 and started a small farm with his wife Becky in Arkansas. Over the last twenty years, Spain says the farming operation continued to grow, but he reports it's still a small farm at 292 acres.

John Spain

While it may be small in size, it's efficiently run. Spain has a herd of 130 commercial cows and grazes all of the calves raised through the stocker phase. "For the past 7-8 years, we have been producing in excess of 600 lbs./beef per acre," says Spain. Even more impressive is the fact that his average out-of-pocket cost for producing a calf to weaning age is less than $100.

Spain says he sells his calves on grade and yield or as pasture beef, depending on where there's the most money to be made in any given year. In addition to beef cattle, he raises confinement turkeys marketed for further processing as turkey ham and turkey bacon.

Of his involvement in AFGC and GLCI Spain says, "I've always been interested in conservation. I had read a lot about AFGC and thought it was a great organization. AFGC has been an important voice for forage agriculture, especially in the East."

Based on his conservation mindset, Spain has devised an intensive grazing program. "I'm looking for something green 12 months out of the year. Our aim is year-round grazing, we store no more than about 45 days of supplemental feed for use during drought or ice storms," he says.

To achieve this, Spain's system is cross-fenced and cattle are moved about every three days, depending on the availability of forages. He operates a stock density of 11 cow/calf pairs per acre. Half of the pastureland is in bermudagrass that is annually overseeded with ryegrass, the balance of the grazing land is in cool season fescue and orchardgrass plantings. White clover and crabgrass are also interspersed in the pastures. They produce no hay, but enough grass silage is harvested from pastures to last for about 45 days – for use during weather events that may limit cattle from grazing.

"Really, truly, there's something green growing here all the time," he states.

The system has proven to be environmentally-friendly. "We have a half mile frontage on river and have been declared pollutant free by the Arkansas Soil and Water Society." That's quite an accomplishment considering that he spreads about 400 ton of turkey litter on 219 acres of pastureland annually. He credits this to using forages that utilize a lot of phosphorus.

Spain's grazing success has made his small farm the focus of numerous tours every year. But, he says it's through those kind of tours that have prompted a tremendous increase in grazing systems in the Eastern part of the U.S. "The education programs and tours hosted by GLCI state coalitions allow producers to see first-hand the environmental and economic benefits of a rest-harvest grazing system," Spain says. He hopes GLCI will continue to do more of the same as well as work to educate Congress about GLCI efforts and importance. "I'd like to see a lot more people in Congress become familiar with GLCI and what we're doing."

For more information on AFGC contact their national office at 800-944-2342. ■

THE CHAIR'S CORNER

By the time this newsletter reaches your mailbox, the National GLCI Steering Committee's fall business meeting held Oct. 24-25 in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, will be complete. This annual event allows for GLCI leadership to update our national business plan, as well as meet with local and national congressional and agency personnel to discuss private grazing land legislation and funding.

This meeting even allows for a trip to the "field." On Friday, the day was dedicated to a tour of two local farms showcasing the conservation practices they have implemented. This year's tour was hosted by the Wisconsin GLCI Coalition and River Country RC&D Council. We thank them for their efforts.

On a concerned note, Dick Kjerstad, Wall, SD, had an accident on his ranch last month. Dick had some internal injuries and is now recovering. Dick represents the American Farm Bureau on the National GLCI Steering Committee.

Finally, as the winter season sets in, take time to attend one of the many one-day workshops or conferences in your local area or state. Whether the topic is grazing, animal production, or marketing, you're likely to come upon a new idea or two, and you may have the chance to share some of your own innovations with a fellow producer.

Bob Drake, Chairman
National GLCI Steering Committee

REQUIRED READING

If you find a little extra time during the winter months, pick up the book *Centennial* by James Michener. It comes highly recommended from Barry Dunn, who has 20 years experience as a South Dakota rancher and is now a professor in the Animal and Range Science Department at South Dakota State University.

Dunn says this book is a very good resource for anyone involved in the ranching community. The book profiles the geological development of the Great Plains, as well as highlights stories of the transfer of several family ranches from one generation to the next. He says the book gives a realistic view of ranching and shares some stories that were successes and others that were not.

GLCI News

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Visit the GLCI homepage at http://www.glci.org

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