Healthy Range Starts with Healthy Soil

Source: Jagadeesh Mosali and Jim Johnson, Noble Foundation

Surface soil produces our food – and the food that livestock eat – and is vital for life. Thus, this precious resource is often called “skin of the Earth,” and just like skin, it is important to protect and maintain its quality.

Soil quality is the inherent capacity of a particular soil to support human health and habitation, maintain or enhance air and water quality, and most importantly, sustain plant and animal productivity.

From an agricultural standpoint, soil quality is vital for improving long-term agricultural productivity and maximizing profits through sustainable productivity.

It is important for soil to both function optimally for current needs and remain healthy for future use. How is that done? Improving and maintaining soil organic matter content is key. This improves soil structure as well as water- and nutrient-holding capacity, supports soil microbes and protects soil from erosion and compaction.

Organic matter can be improved on cropland by using no-till or minimum till methods, growing cover crops, leaving crop residues and using rotations with crops that balance water and nutrient management.

Similarly on range and pasture, leaving residue and managing grazing are important for soil organic matter. Growing cover crops on some of these lands is also now being utilized.

Impact on drought and flood, too

You may think the common thread between drought and flood is water – but actually the bigger factor is soil.

Other than the lack or abundance of precipitation, the reason for droughts and floods is the soil’s inability to effectively absorb and release water. This is true in both grassland and farmland. Low organic matter is one factor that contributes to this.

Organic matter can be thought of like a giant sponge. Soils on the Great Plains typically had around 5% organic matter prior to European settlement. Since then, soil organic matter on farmed soils has decreased to around 1%.

A great deal of this loss in organic matter can be attributed to tillage. Every 1% of organic matter in the top 8 inches of soil can hold 18,000 gallons of water per acre. That is the equivalent of 0.67 inches of rainfall held in the soil for later use by plants.

It is often said it doesn’t matter how much it rains, but how much of it you can use. Organic matter makes rainfall more useable.

It’s clear that to reduce droughts and floods, we must manage the land for healthy soils. Use no-till or reduced till, rotate deep rooted crops, use cover crops, manage crop residues, don’t overgraze, manage for healthy grass. While we can’t eliminate droughts or floods, good management can reduce their impact.
Considerations when converting expiring CRP acres to pasture

Source: South Dakota State University

When the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) was initially launched in the 1985 Farm Bill its goals were primarily soil erosion control and improved water quality. Over time, the program has created an unprecedented positive impact on habitat for many game and non-game species.

But nationwide, there has been a significant drop in CRP acre renewals over the last two years, with many producers opting out of contract extensions in favor of converting marginal CRP lands back to row crops.

As acres expire, Pete Bauman, SDSU Extension Range Field Specialist, encourages landowners to consider their options, particularly in utilizing CRP acres for grazing.

Bauman says, “If livestock producers can connect with CRP owners, conversion of these grasslands to grazing/hay use may be quite feasible depending on CRP landowner interests and values. Without understanding the grazing alternative, CRP landowners may gravitate back to crops simply out of convenience.”

Currently, several agencies and organizations are willing to work with landowners to convert expiring CRP acres into haying and grazing management. Extension, NRCS, and Pheasants Forever all have grassland specialists on hand to assist landowners in the decision making process. The US Fish and Wildlife Service and most State Game, Fish, and Parks staff offer excellent assistance options through their private lands programs.

These programs include assistance and/or cost share for:
- fencing materials for rotational grazing (producer covers labor)
- livestock and water development
- wildlife habitat development
- operational planning assistance
- seeding enhancements

“A key component in developing a grazing plan for expiring CRP is building a relationship with the CRP owner,” Bauman says. Some things to consider when approaching an expiring CRP landowner for a grazing option include:
- Share information. Offer to work with him/her to explore the best alternatives for fence, water, and other needs.
- Educate. Help the CRP owner understand the importance of keeping the grazing industry strong.
- Show sincerity. Offer your services and consider providing the labor for any improvement projects.
- Bring in a third party advisor to help with quality assessment and to ensure balance between the livestock/haying goals and objectives and the CRP owner’s goals and objectives. CRP landowners will likely retain wildlife or habitat interests and may want to limit grazing access to some portions of the project area.
- Rental/purchase rates for grass are on the rise, acknowledge this and offer a fair deal.
- Consider a long-term lease option that provides for fairness in rental rates, stocking rates, grazing timing, and labor inputs by all parties.

For more information, visit with your local Extension specialist or NRCS office.

Ag Adaptations Help Boost Opportunities, Income

A common mantra in agriculture is that the industry is diverse and always changing – and for those who are able to adapt with the times the opportunity to add new income sources awaits. Agritourism is one such example, and as consumer’s appetite for agritourism continues to grow there are many opportunities for the next generation of farmers and ranchers to help reconnect the public with America’s agricultural heritage. Here are some ideas:

Online Innovation
Farmers markets are becoming popular but a new twist is the idea of an “online farmers market.” More than 30 farmer members in Arkansas offer their wares - fruits, vegetables, eggs, poultry, beef, pork, lamb, and dairy – via a website (http://conway.locallygrown.net/). This allows customers to order what they want, in the quantities they want, from the farms they want.

The format is the brainchild of Cody Hopkins – himself a farmer, but he also collects 13% of gross revenue for his efforts in coordinating the online market. Hopkins reports that the business model has been successful and it is helping support small farms and local economies.

Nature Niche
Bruce Hoffman, who operates a ranch near Corpus Christi, TX, while also working off the ranch, has found nature photography to be a viable third income. Hoffman reports that while hunting seems to be hitting a plateau, nature photography and bird watching is just beginning to boom – and he says people who want to take photos will pay for it.

Hoffman has placed photo blinds in strategic wildlife locations on his land to help photographers get that “shot of a lifetime.” As a result, Hoffman says people will pay as much as $250/day for their photo outing. Hoffman says if you add lunch, dinner or a lodge for them to stay at the income potential goes up from there. Holding a “photo clinic” with a highly regarded photographer is another option for increasing the value of the experience.

Hoffman says that in Texas, many community visitors’ bureaus are beginning to promote nature activities such as photography or birding to potential visitors. Hoffman concludes, “It’s economically viable, and it’s also a means to educate the public that these plants and animals are the reason to leave some lands wild and privately owned and managed.”
HELPFUL RESOURCE FOR DAIRY GRAZIERS

The Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship program, based in Wisconsin, has launched a new web presence at www.dairygrazingapprenticeship.org. DGA Communications Coordinator Bridget O’Meara explains that the new website is designed to grow with the program, serve the grazing community and ultimately strengthen Wisconsin’s dairy industry.

It features news items, program highlights, case studies and links to partners as well as information about apprenticeship and online applications for established dairy producers/employers (master dairy graziers) and aspiring farmers/managers (dairy grazing apprentices).

The website is an accessible, user-friendly resource for all current and aspiring dairy farmers who are interested in grazing, whether or not they are involved in the program.

For those interested in the apprenticeship program, O’Meara explains it is composed of 4,000 paid hours of training over two years (the equivalent of a full time job). 3,712 of those hours are on-the-farm experience under the guidance of an approved master dairy grazer. The other 288 hours are paid related instruction, which include courses through the Wisconsin Technical College System and University of Wisconsin as well as pasture walks, farming conferences and peer-to-peer discussion groups.

Participants become dairy grazing apprentices, journey dairy graziers and finally master dairy graziers themselves on a career path that draws on existing support structure and places experienced farmers at the center of the educational process. Ultimately, the program allows experienced dairy graziers to share and transfer knowledge to the next generation.

An apprentice will be an asset to an existing operation during the two-year learning process and may go on to build equity for his or her own farm or manage a grazing dairy. Masters may eventually transfer the farm to this person who understands the operation better than anyone.

Land Management News of Note

New Prescribed Fire Site

The eXtension Prescribed Fire Community of Practice (CoP) went online July 1, 2013. The CoP is comprised of a leadership team of prescribed fire professionals from across the country. The diversity of the team helps provide a wide variety of knowledge from different ecosystems. The Prescribed Fire CoP URL is: www.extension.org/prescribed_fire.

The CoP was created to provide a clearinghouse for information on conducting controlled burns and the effects of fire on plants and wildlife. The CoP provides information on fire through articles and frequently asked questions from the nation’s top prescribed fire personnel. Additionally, an “Ask an Expert” tool is offered to provide a quick response by a fire professional from your region. The CoP also supplies up to date fire news and events.

Most plant communities across North America are adapted to fire, and many plant and wildlife species are dependent upon fire for their survival. Fire suppression following European settlement in North America has caused these areas to dramatically change. Many land managers believe it is critical that fire be restored to create and maintain the conditions necessary for native plants and wildlife. Prescribed fire, sometimes also known as controlled burning, is the way land managers safely and effectively get fire back into these natural areas.

DuPont Offers Stewardship Learning Series

The DuPont Crop Protection land management business unit has introduced the first three in a series of learning modules that address stewardship best practices to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of day-to-day herbicide, insecticide and fungicide use. The Learning Series is a set of easy-to-use, 15- to 20-minute self-directed training modules that are available online 24/7. Pesticide applicators can access the Learning Series online at www.landmanagement.dupont.com/stewardship.

“Product stewardship requires constant collaboration between manufacturers and forage and livestock producers to responsibly maximize production,” says Roxanne Gutschenritter, range and pasture sales manager, DuPont Crop Protection. “Our business is about more than creating innovative products that help preserve and protect investments in land, cattle, horses and other livestock. We also have a responsibility to collaborate with stakeholders, informing and educating them on sound stewardship principles to minimize environmental impact and preserve precious natural resources.”

The three training modules currently available cover these topics:

· Understanding Pesticide Product Labels Learn about the purpose and importance of pesticide product labels, product label types and contents;

· Handling, Storing and Transporting Pesticides Review product stewardship best practices related to handling pesticides, pesticide storage and transportation; and

· Mixing and Loading Pesticides and Disposing of Pesticide Containers Receive techniques for proper pesticide mixing and loading, and procedures for disposing of pesticide containers.

Documentary about farming’s next generation being produced

Oscar-winning and Emmy winning filmmaker James Moll is producing a feature-length documentary about the next generation of American farmers and ranchers. The film, which is yet to be titled is being made in cooperation with the U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance (USFRA), and will profile farmers and ranchers in their 20s who have assumed the responsibility of running the family business.

Moll says he is interested in telling real stories that resonate, and says, “I’ve found the perfect topic in American agriculture.”
NEW CROP OF ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AWARD PROGRAM REGIONAL WINNERS ANNOUNCED

Seven cattle operations from across the country were recognized as 2013 regional Environmental Stewardship Award Program (ESAP) winners during the 2013 Cattle Industry Summer Conference in Denver, Colo., in mid-August. The seven regional winners will compete for the national ESAP award, which will be announced during the 2014 Cattle Industry Annual Convention and Trade Show in Nashville, Tenn. in early February 2014.

ESAP, now in its 23rd year, was created to recognize beef producers who make environmental stewardship a priority on their farms and ranches while they also improve production and profitability. The ESAP award is sponsored by Dow AgroSciences; USDA-NRCS; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; NCBA; and the National Cattlemen’s Foundation.

The regional winners are Mountain Meadows Farm, Sudbury, Vt.; Kissimmee Park Properties, St. Cloud, Fla.; BitterSweet Acres, Greenville, Iowa; Frank and Sims Price Ranch, Sterling City, Texas; Padlock Ranch Company, Ranchester, Wyo.; Kualoa Ranch, Kane‘ohe, Hawaii; and Gracie Creek Landowners Association, Burwell, Neb.

Regional and national award winners have been commended for their commitment to protecting the environment and improving fish and wildlife habitats while operating profitable cattle operations. The common trait among all winners is the desire to leave the land in better shape for future generations while also inspiring the next generation of land stewards. “America’s farmers and ranchers are passionate about their land, and it shows through conservation and environmental stewardship efforts,” said NCBA President Scott George. “The cattle industry is continually improving upon our environmental sustainability, and these seven finalists set an example that we should all strive to achieve.”

To have your GLCI activities or upcoming events highlighted in this newsletter, contact Kindra Gordon at phone 605-722-7699 or kindras@gordonresources.com.