

November 2009

Pasture News

LaGrange County Soil & Water Conservation District
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Dates to Remember:

- January 12 – 14, 2010 – Ft. Wayne Farm Show, Memorial Coliseum, Ft. Wayne, Indiana
- January 20 & 21, 2010 – Heart of America Grazing Conference, Wilmington, Ohio
- January 28 – 29, 2010 – North Central Ohio Dairy Grazing Conference, Dalton, Ohio
- February 5, 2010 – Northern Indiana Grazing Conference, Shipshewana, Indiana
- February 11, 2010 – Southern Indiana Grazing Conference, Odon, Indiana



Forrest Keefer Pasture Walk Nov. 10, 2009

November 10, 2009 started out just as many other days have begun in the Fall of '09- with more rain! We certainly cannot complain about a lack of moisture this year; indeed, some crop farmers in northern Indiana have been heard to express the opinion that we have had enough precipitation for now. Fortunately, the rain quit before noon, and the last Pasture Walk of the year was allowed to proceed on schedule, with overcast skies and temperatures in the low 50's.

The November Pasture Walk was hosted on the farm of Forrest and Jan Keefer north of Wawaka. The program started shortly after 1:00 pm with announcements. Martin opened up the pasture walk with a message from Dennis Wolheter, saying he was sorry he couldn't attend the walk. Martin then stated that the post driver is scheduled solid through mid-December. Another announcement concerned the upcoming Northern Indiana Grazing Conference, which is to be held on February 5, 2010

at the Shipshewana Antique Auction barn. Galen Nissley of Honeyville Feeds, offered a 10% discount on Aloe Juice for the day's "Pasture Walk Special". Martin made mention that SWCD is looking for dedicated people to host Pasture Walks in 2010. Perry Yoder announced that LaGrange County will be hosting Horse Progress Days for 2010, a program that has drawn tens of thousands of attendees in the last couple of years. Horse Progress Days will be held this coming year at the Topeka Sale Barn on July 2 and 3. There will be a presentation there centering on rotational grazing, and the LaGrange County Soil and Water Conservation District will also be sponsoring a booth for the two day event.

With announcements out of the way, the group of 28 farm producers turned their attention to Pasture Walk host Forrest Keefer. Forrest began the walk with the humorous comment asking that the attendees "walk around and tell me what I am doing wrong...and I'll tell you why I'm right". Forrest has lived his life on this farm, growing up here and taking over the milking

operation from his father in 1971. He described his father's method of operating a dairy farm as "old-fashioned continuous grazing." Forrest himself managed the farm as a conventional confined milking operation from 1971 to 1990. He observed during that time that his cows were healthier and happier when they got out on grass-their natural environment-and so in 1990, Forrest transitioned to rotational grazing and has been operating that way ever since.



The Keefer's 60-head milking herd is made up of Guernsey and Guernsey-cross cattle, a breed not common on Midwestern farms any longer. Forrest has maintained Guernsey genetics as the basis for his cows, but has introduced other breeds like Swedish Reds and Holsteins to try to address reproductive problems; an approach that he says has met with limited success. For example, Forrest was attracted to Swedish Reds initially because of the emphasis placed on health traits with that particular breed, but since having experience with them, he has realized that the reason people involved with Swedish Reds have emphasized health *traits* is because Swedish Reds tend to have many health *problems*, like hoof and udder issues. In using these as part of his genetic pool, some of these problems have transferred themselves to some of Keefer's Guernsey-cross's. Incidentally, Forrest utilizes primarily A.I. breeding on his farm, keeping a bull only occasionally with his heifers.

Early in the Walk, Tyler Stutzman asked Forrest about Guernsey milk components. Forrest said that Guernsey milk is very comparable to Jersey milk, with good butterfat numbers and decent quantity production; Forrest said his herd is averaging about 16000 lbs/head/year currently. Besides having them out on pasture, Forrest feeds his cattle 10-12 lbs of corn silage per head per day. There are two concrete silos located next to the dairy barn, but a number of years ago, Forrest compared the cost of replacing a worn-out silo unloader with the cost of purchasing a bagger, and decided to go with the bagger to maximize labor efficiency. The only real drawback to this development has been in trying to control damage and feed loss from the silage bags to raccoons and opossums. The group discussed a number of options that have been used to control these

pests. Forrest did mention that he would gladly share some of his silage with the raccoons if they did not insist on being so wantonly destructive.

Another member of the group asked if Forrest's children were still involved with the farm. Forrest and Jan have two children, a son and a daughter. Their son is a dairy veterinarian living and working in California, and as such, is involved in the dairy industry but obviously not in the Keefer's own operation (Jan's family is from California). His daughter teaches school locally, and has small children of her own, but loves the farm and is involved with it as much as her busy schedule allows. Forrest anticipates that as her children grow older, she will increase her involvement in the farm to an even greater extent.

Daniel Hochstetler, a neighboring grazer to the Keefer's, asked about shelter for the dairy herd. The acreage that Forrest uses for rotational grazing is surrounded by woodland. Forrest has a large deciduous conifer in his yard, a bald cypress. Close by, near the river are some native deciduous conifers, tamaracks. Daniel asked specifically if the Keefer's opened up this wooded area for the cattle in hot summer weather. Forrest responded by saying no, the woods are fenced off from the grazing paddocks. He further pointed out that the light coloration of the Guernseys makes them more resistant to direct sunlight than darker-colored cattle like Holsteins. Thus, heat is not as much of a problem on the Keefer farm as are insects like mosquitoes and biting midges, which are numerous at certain times of the year especially with the close proximity that the farm shares to the north branch of the Elkhart River.



Forrest is a university-trained entomologist, and is thus well equipped to handle any insect problems. He noted that his practice of establishing permanent water tanks has not added to the mosquito problem, as permanent populations of mosquito larvae have also attracted permanent populations of mosquito larvae predators which have

kept the numbers of mature insects under control. Paradoxically, periodic use of insecticides has temporarily increased mosquito populations, since the chemicals not only killed off the mosquitoes, but the predator species as well. Two predatory bugs that work well, however, are called 1) back swimmer and 2) water boatman. Both of these bugs remove mosquito wrigglers from the water tanks, although pour-on applications of UltraBoss (permethrin) will kill these predators, the tanks are usually recolonized after a couple of weeks.



Forrest has developed his own rotational grazing strategies, which makes them unique to himself and his own farming operation. He grazes his dairy herd on 21 permanent grazing paddocks which are measure from 1.25 to 1.5 acres each. This total grazing area is divided by a permanent lane, and a watering system is installed to provide each paddock with a constant supply of fresh water. This water is run into poly tanks installed in permanent locations next to frost free water hydrants. Forrest installed his 3000 feet of plastic water lines underground at an average depth of 40" for year-round operation. He mentioned at the beginning of the Pasture Walk that his poly water tanks have held up well. He purchased 10-one hundred gallon tanks 20 years ago, and in that time he has only had one tank crack and become unusable. This entire system makes fence and water system moves unnecessary and thus makes for very user friendly operation. Forrest himself moves the cows from paddock to paddock, walks to do so (which provides several vital needs, from daily exercise, to opportunity to identify and dig out pasture invasives like burdock, to daily exposure to the animals)-and eliminates the need for a 4-wheeler.

Forrest started pasturing in 1990. For the first couple of years, he concentrated on ryegrass and ladino clover, and as long as moisture remained adequate, these proved to be highly

productive dairy forages. However, much of Forrest's grazing land soils are susceptible to droughtiness, and so early on he changed his forage emphasis to orchard grass as being a more consistent forage through dryer conditions. Forrest believes that the biggest problem with his pasture is the Kentucky Bluegrass. He believes that the easiest way to manage a bluegrass problem is by not over grazing—bluegrass thrives on being clipped often. The combination of grasses, Forrest stated, is a result of what was planted 20 years ago. A lighter colored grass sporadically displayed on the pasture, matua prairie grass, found places in the pasture and adapted, most likely spreading from cows carrying seeds from place to place.

One of the PW attendees pointed out that the cows have no obvious identification system and asked Forrest how he keeps track. Forrest stated that they are actually tattooed inside their ears, but that doesn't really matter because by this time he knows them all not only by looks alone, but by name as well.

Forrest uses colored duct tape for management purposes. For example, he may know one cow is dry, but he will signify a dry cow with a band of blue duct tape so people who help him on his farm know the difference. One attendee asked if Forrest keeps his dry cows with the others. He said he does because he can get away with it by knowing how to balance cations.

Forrest has been fortunate in being able to find good reliable help for his dairy operation. He currently has three employees which help him on the farm, working primarily in the milking operation. Forrest himself moves the cattle from paddock to paddock, does the crop farming and harvesting, and makes the management decisions on his farm. Forrest mentioned during the Walk that efficiency is not necessarily a strong point on his farm; milking the way he does it takes a long time (2.5 hours). His primary function in milking, Forrest says, is to pop into the barn often enough to annoy his employees.

This division of labor appears to keep everyone happy on the Keefer farm. Forrest and his wife Jan rely on their farm help enough to allow them to do some fairly extensive travelling. This includes visiting their son and Jan's family in California to fairly regular trips to Europe, to see a couple of different exchange students that the Keefer's have hosted over the years. This system appears to work well for the Keefer

family, and helps them to avoid the “burnout” that has affected so many single family dairy farms over the years. Forrest mentioned tough dairy prices experienced by everyone so far in 2009, but said despite that, he has been able to show some profit this year. He attributes his success in this to efforts made to do two things; 1) minimize debt and 2) produce a majority of his own feed.

The Pasture Walk in the field ended with a discussion about how Forrest handles health issues with his cows, specifically on how he deals with mastitis and Johne’s Disease. He avoids mastitis by keeping milking machine settings conservative-in Forrest’s words, he wants his milking operation to be as “goof-proof” as possible. He is also aggressive in his treatment of ‘leakers’- if a cow on the Keefer farm has a tendency toward this, she is either cured or culled-leaking is not tolerated, as it tends to put the rest of the herd at risk for mastitis as well. He had experienced some problems with Johne’s Disease a number of years ago, and has solved that problem by vaccinating his herd.

We finished the last Pasture Walk of 2009 up by the milk house, where Jan Keefer provided a delicious snack of coffee, cider and cookies for everyone in attendance. The group spent some time there looking at the set up of

the farmstead buildings and in informal discussion.

Near the end of the program out in the field, Forrest made an observation that this Pasture Walk group was a larger number of people than he is used to being around. He said he doesn’t mind being amongst people, but he enjoys being on the farm because he actively likes cows. From being on the Keefer farm, this fact is apparent. Forrest likes his cows, and his cows, in turn, like Forrest. His concern for their well being is what led him to start rotational grazing in the first place. Herein lies the real secret to success on the Keefer farm. Thanks once again, Forrest and Jan, for hosting the November 2009 Pasture Walk!

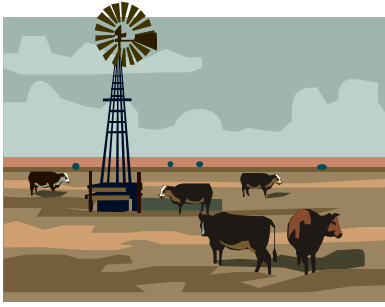


Water Quality Monitoring Funded through 319 Non-Point Source Pollution Program

The Paired Watershed Study in the headwaters of the Little Elkhart River is a project to demonstrate that best management practices (BMPs) installed do make a significant reduction in non-point loading to the surface waters. After collecting water quality data over a 30 month period, installation of BMPs began in the treatment sub-watershed of Bontrager Ditch-Emma Lake, while no BMPs are being installed in the control sub-watershed of Bontrager Ditch-Hostetler Ditch. Water testing data is collected at strategic locations throughout each sub-watershed on a monthly basis and analyzed to document any real reductions in non-point source pollution after BMPs have been installed. Although installation of BMPs continues in the treatment area, a significant reduction of pollutants has already been realized when comparing data of the treatment area vs. the control area. The bacteria *E.coli* has been reduced by 34%, nitrogen by 18%, total phosphorus by 15%, and sediment by 43%. After all locations have had BMPs installed, these numbers are expected to climb to much higher reductions. Work will continue in the entire Little Elkhart River watershed over the next several years, with a significant improvement in water quality expected in the entire stretch of the river.

Landowners living within the Little Elkhart River drainage can participate in the grant program over the next several years. There are many BMPs that will enhance operations and water quality with 75% of the cost covered by the grants, funded by Indiana Department of Environmental Management/Environmental Protection Agency. For individuals wishing additional information on this program or a copy of the Watershed Management Plans, please contact the LaGrange County SWCD at 260-463-3471 extension 3.

Pharo Cattle Company-Cheyenne Wells, Colorado



Kit Pharo has been a long time producer and advocate of rotational grazing in eastern Colorado. Pharo Cattle Company has been in the process of developing good genetic strains of beef cattle principally from four breeds-Black and Red Angus, Herefords, and Tarentaise-that thrive in a grass-fed only environment. Kit produces a bimonthly newsletter and a biweekly email that shares his ideas on Christianity and rotational grazing to farmers and ranchers across the United States.

Martin and Christine Franke (Martin works for the LaGrange County SWCD) and LaGrange grazer and Pasture Walk hosts Vernon and Joan Hochstetler recently visited the area near the Pharo Ranch. They were able to look at rotational grazing western style, and also had the opportunity to attend the Fall 2009 Pharo Cattle Company Heifer and Bull Sale at nearby Burlington, CO.

Rotational grazing in eastern Colorado in some ways is far different from the way it is practiced here in Indiana. Here in Hoosierland, rotational grazing to many means dairy production, while out west it is mostly equated with the raising of beef cattle. Due to differences in soils and moisture levels, appropriate animal to acreage density and forage species are obviously far different from place to place. And a “Cowboy Auction” is very different from one east of the Mississippi-if you want to know how, ask a cowboy! Still, the name of the game, East and West, in rotational grazing is low-input, high-return Ag production in a natural, conservation-friendly environment.

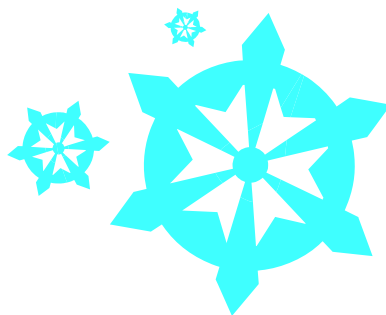
If you are interested in adding more of a western flavor to your understanding of management intensive rotational grazing, grass-fed only livestock production, and perhaps a challenge to develop your faith to a higher degree, here is information to allow you to connect with the publications of “PCC”-the Pharo Cattle Company. Kit and company can be reached at the Pharo Cattle Company, 44017 County Road Z, Cheyenne Wells, CO 80810. Their toll-free phone number is 800-311-0995. To subscribe to their biweekly newsletter, PCC can be reached at Kit@PharoCattle.com.

*A special thanks to Pasture Walk hosts of 2009: **Lavern Bontrager, Ray Eash, Vernon Hochstetler, Ernest Stutzman, Bob Eash, Floyd Miller, John Belork, and Forrest Keefer.** Pasture Walks run from April to November, so unfortunately we will all have to wait until next Spring to take a “Pasture Walk” once again! *If you are interested in hosting a 2010 Pasture Walk and haven’t hosted one in the last year or two, we are always looking for a new educational experience to share with the community. If interested, call LaGrange Co. SWCD at (260) 463-3471 ext.3. Ask for Martin Franke and we will contact you to set specific dates and times.**

While we anxiously wait for beloved Spring, we mustn’t forget that which inspires us, taken best from author Hal Borland,

“There are two seasonal diversions that can ease the bite of any winter. One is January thaw. The other is the seed catalogue.”

If you need assistance with this winter’s bite, feel free to call LaGrange SWCD for a Tree Order Form. We have many varieties available until mid-March.



Until next time, have a happy winter!

Ah yes, yet another reason to look forward to winter: The Northern Indiana Grazing Conference! Every year we expect more people, so make sure to get your registration in as soon as possible! Watch for registration forms in your mailbox right after Christmas. We are no longer accepting applications for exhibitor spaces as we are full but if your company would like to contribute and/or be a sponsor, we'd appreciate the help!

2010 Northern Indiana Grazing Conference Agenda:

7:00 a.m. - **Registration**—Rolls, juice, coffee, & milk.

8:00 a.m. - **Welcome & Introductions** - Melvin Helmuth

8:15 – 9:45 a.m. - **Break Out Session** (Choose 1)

- **“Balanced Soil Fertility - How it affects plants & animals”**—Gary Zimmer
- **“Utilizing Home-grown Grass Based Foods”**—Allen Sexton, Sheffield, Illinois

9:45 — 10:15 a.m.- **BREAK**

10:15 — 11:45 a.m. - **Farmer Panel, “Looking Forward—Looking Back”**

- David Borkholder, Nappanee
- John Kuhns, LaGrange
- John V. Yoder, LaGrange
- Mike & Sue Martin, Wakarusa

11:45 — 12:45 p.m. - **Lunch**

12:45—1:15 p.m. - Gary Zimmer — **“Building the Community with family and local foods”**

1:15 — 2:00 p.m. - **Financial Panel Discussion— “How to use Your Financial Figures to be Successful”**

2:00—2:30 p.m.- **Break**

2:30—3:15 p.m.- **Break Out Session** (Choose 1)

- **Dairy**—David Surprenant, Manteno, Illinois: — **“Irrigation—Maximizing Your Grazing Potential”**
- **Beef**—Lee Hitzfield, Hitzfield Family Farms, Roanoke, Indiana: **“Grass Finishing Beef”**

3:15—4:00p.m. - Multi-Species Grazing

- Matt Wiley, Schoolcraft, Michigan—**Sheep**
- Vernon Hochtetler, LaGrange—**Horses**

4:00 — 5:30 p.m. - **Supper**

6:00 — 8:00 p.m. - **Evening Session, “Involving the Family”** (Direct Marketing)

- Lee Hitzfield Family
- Allen Sexton

January 29th is the deadline for the early registration fee! Early registration is \$30 per person (\$20 for each additional family member). Late/on-site registration \$45 per person (\$35 for each additional family member). Call LaGrange Co. SWCD if you need a registration form. (260) 463-3471 ext. 3