



MAY 2009

Pasture News

LAGRANGE COUNTY SOIL & WATER
CONSERVATION DISTRICT
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Ray would like to have a relaxed walk where topics will be discussed as questions arise.

HOST: Ray Eash

2570 S 400 E

LaGrange, IN 46761

May 12th, 2009 ~ 1:00p.m.

“CALF RAISING”

While the weather was not very cooperative, with below normal temperatures in the low 40's, an east wind and intermittent rain, the LaGrange County Pasture Walk kickoff turned out to be quite a success. The event was hosted by the Lavern Bontrager family. Their 80 acre certified organic dairy farm is located a couple of miles north of LaGrange, west of Indiana State Road 9 on county road 200 N.

Tuesday afternoon, April 14, a group of 43 farm producers from 5 Indiana counties and one Michigan county met in Lavern's milk house for the first Pasture Walk of 2009. Dennis Wolheter began the program with a welcome and some introductions. Dennis explained that this season marked a transition for him, as he officially retired as the SWCD's Livestock Management Specialist back in the end of December. Pasture Walks, as well as the annual Northern Indiana Grazing Conference, have played such an important part in Dennis's life for the past 9 years, however, that he is planning to continue to be involved in both programs on a voluntary basis. Everyone is happy to see that retirement is not going to take Dennis out of the picture at Pasture Walks!

Following introductions, Dennis mentioned to the group that the April event was serving a dual purpose this spring. Besides beginning the 2009 Pasture Walk season, the SWCD had arranged with host Lavern Bontrager to use the meeting to fulfill some follow-up requirements of a Clean Water Indiana Grant that was written last year. The first part of this grant was carried out last September with a nutrient management field day that began with a program at Cook's Bison Ranch near Wolcottville, and ended with a bus tour of various ag operations in the afternoon.

The follow up held at the pasture walk included short addresses from NRCS and SWCD staff to the group concerning nutrient and manure management. Dave Hague, NRCS District Conservationist, spoke for a short time about various aspects of farm nutrient management including manure storage, soil and manure testing, equipment calibration, yield goals and soil fertility supplementation. Jerry Perkins, Grazing Land Specialist, also with NRCS, added some comments concerning balancing nutrients that leave the farm in the form of product-crops, milk, and meat. Martin Franke from the LaGrange Soil and Water Conservation District spoke to the group concerning county ordinances related to manure management planning for livestock producers. Steve Engleking of LaGrange County Purdue Extension Service added some information for the group from the perspective of serving on the County Plan Commission.



Following this short segment of the program, farm host Lavern Bontrager welcomed the group to his farm. He gave a brief history of the operation, explaining that he and his family left a smaller farm in the Topeka area to move north of LaGrange 2 years ago. Although several people cautioned him that his new home was going to be quite a challenge, Lavern, his wife Verda and six children, moved ahead with their plans, and now, two years later, Lavern says that he has decided that his new farm is as he put it "...a diamond in the rough!" Yes, Lavern says, the buildings were run down and the fields full of weeds, but through a lot of hard work and family cooperation, the farm is gradually moving in the direction that the Bontragers want to see it go.

The first major project that Lavern embarked upon was setting up a new milk house, loose housing barn and bedding pack. Since this is contained in a new building, Lavern was able to arrange things just the way he wanted. He stated that he has no regard for free stall barns anymore, and will never go back to that system.

At this point, Lavern also exhorted the group concerning his belief in bedding his cattle with hay instead of shavings or straw. He strongly advocates that dairy producers buy a bale chopper and bed with hay, since he believes that manure spread on the fields from a hay bedding pack do much more to build the soil and add nutrients-especially nitrogen-than straw bedded manure. Lavern explained that he does not use hay exclusively for bedding, but does so as much as possible. He says that hay bedding mixed with manure does definitely provide a vehicle for quickly achieving good soil fertility, since decomposing hay immediately returns the nutrients it contains to the soil upon which it is

spread. Decomposing straw, on the other hand, containing only the hollow stalks of the grain on which it grew, actually uses up nitrogen from the ground on which it is applied.



Next, Lavern moved on to the feature topic of the afternoon-calf raising. Success in this area is ensured by a number of different practices. The Bontrager family milks into stainless steel buckets, and before feeding milk to the calves, immerse the bucket in 160° water. They monitor the milk until it reaches 120°, and then head for the calf hutches. Lavern says feeding cold milk to calves is definitely NOT the thing to do!

The rain outside finally let up, so the group all moved outside to Lavern's calf hutch area. He built these structures himself with simple materials; lumber, sheet steel and plywood. At first, he made the 8' X 16' hutches three sided, but found them too drafty for the calves to live in comfortably, so he boxed the fourth side in except for an access door about 3' wide and perhaps 4 ½' high. The buildings are not fancy; as Lavern pointed out, he didn't spend much money on metal trim, and according to him, the calves haven't complained yet! They are single sloped roof structures, with the front side being about 7½ high, sloping down to 5 or so feet in the back. He did recommend a thin layer of foam insulation be installed under the sheet steel roof to prevent condensation from dripping on the calves and the bedding.

Two general principles that Lavern touted as keys to successful family farming rang true to the group. These are 1) Keep your children interested and involved in the family farm by giving them responsibilities appropriate to their ages and interests and; 2) accept losses due to mistakes without assigning blame. Lavern believes if you don't let young people develop some of their own ways of doing things, or make some of their own errors, they won't learn effectively how to accomplish things on their own.

After communicating that to the group, Lavern presented a sheet on the "Costs of Calf Raising" that he had developed with some help from another Pasture Walk attendee, Jim Court right. A copy of this sheet is included along with this edition of *The Pasture News*.

Following the lesson on calf raising, the group went on to tour several of Lavern's grazing paddocks. As mentioned before, the Bontrager farm consists of 80 acres. Lavern is renting some additional acreage from a neighbor to the north. Unfortunately for him, his farm is also located near the end of a large watershed area that reaches all the way back to west of the town of LaGrange, and therefore, there are times when 10 acres or so of the farm might be under water! This problem was apparent as we toured the fields, and the suggestion was made that he might consider purchasing canoes and renting them out to supplement the farm income! Seriously, however, seasonal drainage and wet soils do pose a serious challenge for Lavern as he strives to improve his farm's productivity.

The farm that the Bontragers now call home was left basically fallow for several years before they moved in. This made weed control difficult, but did help in the organic certification process. Since chemicals had not been used there, the land was organically certifiable right away; however, since it took a year to certify the dairy herd, Lavern waited and went through the entire process all at once.

As we walked the fields, Lavern mentioned some of the other challenges that he has faced. Of course raising calves does not happen without encountering salmonella and scours. In some regards, Lavern considers some things a blessing that others might see as a curse. His farm, he says, is rich in quack grass. While some might see this as a problem, especially on an organic operation where limited chemical control is possible, Lavern loves his quack grass! To quote him "...me and quack grass are best friends!" He says this is one of the best nitrogen producing plow downs he has ever discovered before planting a new corn crop.



Lavern and the LaGrange County Soil Survey agree on one thing. Lavern mentioned that in many parts of his farm, soil stability is jeopardized by a deep layer of black, highly organic muck soil lying just under the top soil. This makes it hard to maintain lanes or have solid fences. When this soil type is wet, it's a problem, and when dry, it also will not retain moisture crucial to the growth and development of the forages Lavern's cattle need.

The tour of the farm fields itself was brief, owing I think to the persistent rain showers and cold wind. Field 5 had been, as Lavern said, a permanent pasture as far as he could tell clear back to 1961. Lavern has recently over seeded this field with clover, which he hopes will fix enough Nitrogen to help with soil fertility. He does not plan to plow this field, as he anticipates too many stones. A neighboring 8-acre field, #4, he began plowing with 3 horses and a two bottom plow. Stones were a problem, and Lavern soon decided to hitch 3 more horses for a total of 6. This still didn't work out too well, so he ended up tilling Field 4 with 6 horses and a 1 bottom plow. This combination finally did the trick, but it is not an experience Lavern would like to repeat in the near future.

Fields 7 and 8 were planted to the same mix as Field 4. A short but lush growth showing a lot of clover was apparent here. Lavern said here that long term, he thinks some additional concrete in the barn area, and improved drainage would help his farming efforts greatly.

The group reconvened back at the Bontrager farm in the wash house attached to their home. Here, Verda provided everyone with some very welcome hot coffee and cookies. The SWCD also brought some pop and water along for refreshments. Dennis and Martin made a few final announcements, and the Purdue/NRCS publication *Management Intensive Grazing in Indiana* was distributed as part of the nutrient management part of the program, which ended at around 3:30 pm.

Cost per Calf—from calf to freshening

70 days milk (1200 lbs at 28.60 p/cwt)	\$343.20
50 lb calf starter (\$34.00/100 lb)	\$17.00
480 lb calf grower (\$32.00/100 lb)	\$153.60
950 lb corn	\$199.50
Pasture (weaning to winter feed @ 75¢/day)	\$146.25
145 days baleage @ \$1.25/day	\$168.75
225 days pasture @ \$1.00/day	\$225.00
75 days winter feed @ \$2.00/day	\$150.00
Approximate Total	\$1403.30

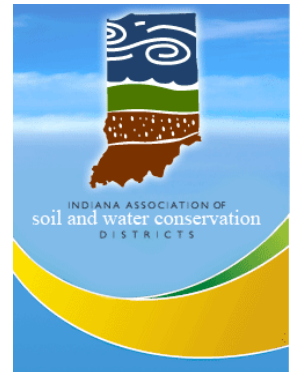


LaGrange County Soil Surveys

The LaGrange County SWCD office recommends you are familiar with the soil types on your land. Your soil type can and will directly impact the production of your crops and pastures. Soil types will also tell you where you can expect excess moisture or extreme drought. The SWCD has copies of the LaGrange County Soil Survey. It is an informative publication that may answer many questions you may have. Please feel free to contact the office to receive your copy of the LaGrange County Soil Survey.

Manure Management Field Day—July 2009

Mark your calendar for July 29, 2009 and plan on attending a manure management field day hosted by Whiteshire Hamroc Farm in Noble County. The day will begin at 10:00 a.m. with an overview of the Whiteshire Hamroc operation focusing on the economics of manure, historical manure application compared to current application methods, and fertility management. Lunch will be provided free of charge to the first 100 who register. This field day will focus on the “challenge” of manure management with no-till/reduced tillage systems. In the afternoon field demonstrations will be held on the Dudley Parker property. The field day is sponsored by the Wood-Land-Lakes RC&D – Kosciusko, LaGrange, Noble, Steuben, St. Joseph and Whitley County SWCDs. Watch for more information in future newsletters and newspapers.



Little Elkhart River Watershed Update

The two grants received through the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Non Point Source Pollution Program administered by Indiana Department of Environmental Management (IDEM) are providing important steps in identifying water quality issues in the Little Elkhart River Watershed. One very important step in the process is the education component. In March a very successful meeting was held in the watershed with about 70 landowners in attendance. The two speakers at the meeting – Dr. Paul Webb, Veterinarian and Steve Engleking, Purdue Cooperative Extension Educator – talked about the importance of keeping livestock out of the streams and ditches in order to maintain good animal health. Water borne pollutants can and do cause health issues and Dr. Webb was able to relate actual cases that he had worked with where serious health issues caused illness and even death in livestock who were getting their primary drinking water from streams and ditches. Steve Engleking talked about the need to fence livestock out of streams and ditches when applying for organic certification.

Another important step in the process is the development of a watershed management plan for the area. The watershed management plan for 3 of the sub-watersheds has been completed, approved, and is in the implementation phase. The second watershed management plan for the remaining 4 sub-watersheds is in the review stage with IDEM and should be approved within the next few weeks. Once the plan is approved the implementation phase will and installation of best management practices can begin.



For more information on the Little Elkhart River Watershed contact the SWCD office.

Promoting Summer Pasture Growth

Daryl Clark

Ohio State University Extension

August forage will not equal May forage. However, the grazier can implement some practical management practices, which will increase both the quality and quantity of available summer pasture production. Consider these:

1. **Use a managed grazing plan.** The grazier who maintains the forage plant in a vegetative state will cause the plant to grow longer into the summer months. The dormancy after seed production can be eliminated; however, temperature and moisture factors will still be at work. A vegetative plant will continue to produce summer foliage.
2. **Early summer fertilization.** Although early Spring fertilization can significantly increase yield, a late May or early June application will help extend growth into the summer months. Forage which is vegetative at the time of application will be "jumpstarted" to produce another "flush." This application should be just prior to a significant (1/4 inch plus) rainfall. Nitrogen application alone may increase growth, but it may translocate phosphorus and potash from root stores. Develop a fertility management program which gives balanced nutrition to the plants.
3. **Maintaining root development.** Although developing a grazing plan is a distinct subject, a vegetative plant must have rest periods to restore root stores to continue to make significant growth. A short (2-4 days) grazing period, followed by significant rest period (16-18 days spring and 30 days summer) to restore root reserves is critical. The above-ground plant growth will be a reflection of the below-ground growth. Healthy, abundant roots will result in greater top growth to be grazed.
4. **Leave more forage stubble.** By leaving a greater stubble after grazing, the soil surface will be shaded to allow less evaporation from hot summer weather. At the same time, longer stubble will leave more leaves. Therefore, initial regrowth can be from energy produced by photosynthesis in these leaves rather than root reserves. A large part of maintaining more stubble is to lengthen rest periods between grazings. Greater length of growth will help keep animals from grazing as closely so stubble length can be maintained.
5. **Use deep rooted forages.** Deep rooted forage legumes and grasses help capture moisture and fertility from greater depths.
6. **Clipping overgrown plants.** Pasture clipping to keep plants from seedhead production can be useful in maintaining forage in a vegetative state. Clipping after seed formation is mostly cosmetic; it looks better, but it does not make plants more vegetative. Although this is not an exhaustive list, many of these factors are highly related and management in one area can also assist other areas.

If you would be interested in receiving a copy of the Managed Intensive Grazing publication please contact the office and we will be sure to bring one to the next walk.

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Upcoming Walks

May 12—Ray Eash, 2570 S 400 E, LaGrange
June 9—Vernon Hochstetler, 3735 S 00 EW, LaGrange
July 14—Ernest Stutzman, 10720 CR 28, Middlebury
August 11—Bob Eash, 11325 E 550 S, Hudson
September 8—Floyd Miller, 9690 W 200 S, Shipshewana
October 13—John Belork, 4435 E 500 N, Hamlet, IN
November 10—Forrest Keefer, 3829 W 800 N, Wawaka