

Midwest Perennial Forage Working Group
October 5, 2016

Quarterly Conference Call

Present:

Gene Schriefer, Univ. of Wisconsin Extension
Tom Gervais, NRCS – Duluth, MN
Kent Solberg, Sustainable Farming Association of MN
Meghan Filbert, Practical Farmers of Iowa
Jim Paulson, U of MN Extension
Laura Paine, Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship
Jane Jewett, MN Institute for Sustainable Agriculture

Round-Robin Updates:

Meghan Filbert. Data on grazing restrictions has been compiled for 27 herbicides. Now PFI is trying to figure out the clearest way to put this information into a fact sheet. Probably they will adapt the Penn State planting restrictions fact sheet and re-work it to be more approachable; then create the grazing restrictions fact sheet in the same style and cross-reference the two. It's on the priority list and PFI is hoping to get it out yet this fall.

PFI is just wrapping up its field day season. The main task now is compiling data from on-farm research and writing research reports. An interesting workshop series this year involved following a group of beef animals as yearlings and then as finishers; then a final field day will be at a slaughter plant to look at the carcasses. An upcoming workshop Nov 15-17 is "Three Days with Fred Provenza," a free workshop in Winterset, IA. <http://practicalfarmers.org/news-events/newsroom/news-release-archive/23759/>

Kent Solberg. Grazing workshops held Aug. 15-16 brought in about 75 people in Redwood Falls and 25 to 30 in Marshall. This was a collaboration with PFI and LSP through the Pasture Project. It included incorporating cover crops into pasture and grazing of cover crops, and was a very positive field day. Another field day coming up in Floodwood, MN features a grass-based 160-cow dairy that buys in grain and is making a go of it even at \$13/cwt milk price. In comparison, a 175-cow dairy in Underwood, MN is losing money every month at \$15/cwt or below milk price, because it's more heavily grain-based.

Jim Paulson. Highlighted a few recent articles: The Star-Tribune newspaper in Mpls/St. Paul recently had a series of articles focused on water quality, featuring the Chippewa 10% project and a beef farmer, Dan Jenniges. The farmer was held up as an example of someone doing everything right for water quality, but said he doesn't think that much about water quality - he does what he does because it makes him money.

<http://www.startribune.com/mighty-mississippi-river-faces-mounting-environmental-threats/393294611/>

Also, a recent U of MN report compared U of MN soil tests to the Haney test and dismissed the value of the Haney test. Noted that the Haney tests in that study were done on conventional tilled fields, not organic or no-till fields. It could be that Haney works better on healthier soils.

<http://blog-crop-news.extension.umn.edu/2016/09/should-soil-health-test-results-be-used.html>

Laura Paine. Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship has a presence at the Dairy Expo to try to recruit DGA Masters to mentor beginning graziers. Laura is on the GrassWorks Conference committee. It's the 25-year anniversary of that conference and it will focus on dairy. Larry Tranel from Iowa State University will be there; also Jim Gerrish and Allen Nation, who was involved in starting the original conference.

Tom Gervais. Tom works with the NRCS, based on Duluth, MN. He's been following the group for a couple of years and is interested in perennial forages. He has worked with 23 counties in east central Minnesota for about 12 years as an NRCS grazing specialist. Most of his time is spent working with producers to write grazing plans. Most of his clients are beef cow/calf producers; there is a lot of grass-based production in the region. Thanks to the group for letting him join!

Doug Gucker. Illinois is a little behind the rest of the Midwest with regard to water quality. Sarah Taylor Lovell at UI is doing studies on landscape as it relates to water quality, trying to change the corn & soybean mindset. Obstacles to change: grain farmers don't want to give up their winters off, or their crop insurance. Low grain prices help start a conversation about change, though, and a few younger farmers are willing to try. Land prices have gone down about \$3,000/acre, from \$15,000 to about \$12,000 or \$11,500 for prime flatland. Rolling land is seeing competition from developers. (Laura noted that Dane Co., WI land values are \$12,000 to \$15,000/ac.; just in that county.)

Gene Schriefer. Currently burning pastures as part of work with The Nature Conservancy on implementation of patch-burn grazing, and starting to collect research data on species composition. Helped organize a workshop on reclaiming overgrown pastures, using goats for brush control. This project is not complete but already we're seeing an increase in grass.

Working with a watershed group on grazing to improve water quality. Shrimpers and other seafood harvesters from Louisiana came for a visit to see what's being done to keep soil out of their water. We're thinking of sending a Wisconsin delegation to Louisiana to visit our soil and see the hypoxic zone. Louisiana has 3rd & 4th generation fishermen the way Wisconsin has 3rd and 4th generation farmers; those groups can understand each other.

Cover crop workshop in Lancaster focused on economics; adding a forage use for the cover crops improves the economics. Gene is now coordinating an in-service for grazing professionals, since Rhonda Gildersleeve retired and was not replaced. The invite list for that needs to be updated. Other activities: planting Kernza for Valentin Picasso's project, and taking soil tests including Haney test in ground that has been in grazing for about 12 years.

Case Studies Discussion

Following up on Kent Solberg's observation of the better financial position of grass-based dairies -- can we capture dairy case studies as an illustration of goals of the group?

- Some dairy producers have an ingrained mindset of more machinery, more production is always better; they have lost sight of the concept of profit margin. Having examples focused on profit margin might help.
 - Or might not; a drop in RHA due to more grazing would be really tough for some producers to take even if they would actually make more money.
- Lots of variables go into who can make money with dairy. Northeastern MN is not really dairy country; the dairies that are surviving are grass-based. We could look at other operations as well and take a broad view.
- Around 10 farms would be good; could we get an RMA grant to do this and demonstrate the value of grazing for dairy production with facts and figures?
- This could also be illustrated for beef, but maybe for a single grant project it's better to focus on just one.
- Advantage of focusing on dairy now is that dairy is struggling; this is a good opportunity to gather data and show a new model. Grass-fed beef is more of an established niche.
- Investment in feed-handling equipment and facilities makes it harder for dairy producers to look at other options, but it doesn't have to be either/or: grass-based dairies can be hybrid systems that also use grain.
 - Grazing is flexible enough to fit into any system.
 - Look at existing resources on a farm and how to make the best use.
- Wisconsin has been collecting data on grass-based dairy for 20 years, but the data are inaccessible to the average person. Case studies put a face on it and now is a teachable moment.
- The case studies could get into dairy classes at the U of MN, Ridgewater College; get young people to look at this and pay attention to the advantages of grazing.
- Also could pursue dairy clubs as possibly an easier entry point to talk to young people than professors' classes.

2016 GLBW Conference Session in Columbia, MO

We'll have 90 minutes for the Perennial Forage session.

Initial concept for the session was grazing to control invasives, but that shifted a bit to grazing for vegetation management.

- Diomy Zamora will give a presentation about beef grazing in savannah woods/restoration of oak savannah through silvopasture. He can bring a farmer-collaborator along to co-present and MPFWG will pay for travel.
- From Missouri we have Max Alleger presenting. He's with the Missouri Department of Conservation and very supportive of managed grazing for wildlife habitat and conservation. Max will pay his own travel; MPFWG will pay for the producer's mileage to attend.
- MPFWG has a budget and could pay for at least part of the trip if others want to attend.

- Jane can help put posters together and get them printed at U of MN Printing Services. Poster information and materials need to be provided to her by Nov. 15 in order to have them ready for the Nov. 29-30 conference.
 - Meghan has results of some on-farm research that she will send for possible development into a poster.
- Travel: Jane will check out a U of MN Fleet Services vehicle and folks can carpool.

Website Usage

The usage statistics are showing pretty low traffic to the site. We need to keep it in front of people on a regular basis.

- Link to materials that others are working on
- Send materials, links, etc. to Jane

Grant Funding Discussion

- Jane and Aaron Reser had a conversation about opportunities for the MPFWG and Watershed Initiative to collaborate on grant-funded projects. Kernza is a potential area of collaboration: it could be grazed, or the grain fed to livestock, so it has potential to be integrated into a livestock operation.
 - No new Kernza seed will be available until fall of 2017
 - We could potentially build something related to the work by Valentin Picasso and Craig Sheaffer if we don't want to wait until after 2017.
- How to apply for funds for the WG and not compete with the member organizations?
 - Jane will keep the group updated on discussions with Aaron about collaborations
 - Check-in about members' intentions to apply so we're not after the same grants at the same time.
 - DGA will apply for a Beginning Farmer & Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) grant.
 - PFI also intends to apply for BFRDP, for a land transfer project.
 - PFI intends to apply for Farmers Advocating For Organics (FAFO).
 - SARE Partnership grants might be a good fit for our mini-grant idea
 - Extension Risk Management Education
 - Needs to be specifically about crop insurance
 - Helping farmers put together grant proposals for SARE Farmer-Rancher or in-state demonstration grants might be one option.
 - Lots of poor-quality proposals come in from farmers; we could help
 - Michael Fields Institute has a grant consultant, Deirdre Birmingham