

'Grass farmers' let livestock do the work

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“(Grass farming) is not labor intense and it’s not equipment intense. It’s basically using the animals to do the work for you,” said a Nebraska grass farmer at the Nebraska Grazing Conference.

Both John McGlynn of Knox County and Randy Jenkins of Custer County own and manage custom grazing operations. Both manage other people’s livestock on their lands.

McGlynn said he works with the livestock owners to develop a management plan that meets their objectives. He regularly reviews the cattle, looking for health conditions, any changes and injuries.

He keeps the animals on fresh grass so they’re not “traipsing through their own waste.” He has less dust problems and develops more biodiversity by moving cattle often. By keeping animals off already-grazed areas, he allows the grass to rest and redevelop. He also uses “mob grazing” to manage the grass.

“What you’re trying to replicate is the actions of the buffalo herds. They came through in herds of thousands and thousands. They tore up and ate up and poured their waste over a small area,” McGlynn said.

He uses mob grazing on selected areas like weedy patches. The cattle “eat it or stomp it into the ground and destroy it.” He said that takes the place of spraying chemicals or running equipment that burns fossil fuels.

He said he uses a reel with polywire and charges it with a solar or battery system, or hooks it up to 110-volt power outlet. The cattle know what the wire does, he said, so they stay away from it.

Jenkins said he wanted to get away from row crop production where he was always paying somebody else. Low commodity prices and input prices escalating seemed to him like a vicious cycle.

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He wanted to grow grass in a manner that allowed the animal to do the work “instead of me being out there on a tractor.”

He said he custom grazes cattle and “all of a sudden, somebody’s paying me. When they leave the cattle, they leave a check that helps pay my bills.”

Of his experience switching to grass, he said it got kind of lonely. His conversion involved taking a lot of cropland out of production and planting it to grass.

“You don’t get much affirmation for that,” he said. “If you’re relying on your neighbors and friends applauding that, you’re probably going to be disappointed.”

He advised producers who want to switch to grass farming to find mentors, people who’ve come the same direction they want to go. New grass farmers need people with the same goals to encourage and “grow” them in their management.

One of the most important tasks is to be observant, he said. Learning to observe the grass, its growth, as well as understanding and observing the animals, makes it easier to know when to move them, how to take care of them.

“Observing—so much of this is slowing down to observe and in our fast-paced world, that’s a task in itself,” Jenkins said.

Grass farming provides a way to reduce input costs and to reduce the work load and it’s a way to manage risk.