

Making pasture walks more than just a walk in the pasture

Final Report for ENC10-119

Project Type: Professional Development Program

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Grant Recipient: DATCP

Region: North Central

State: Wisconsin

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Project Information

Abstract:

This project sought to merge the established informal communication and education mechanisms that serve grazing farmers with institutional research-based resources by creating a network for enhancing the capacity of agency and non-profit personnel to deliver managed grazing education to their local clientele. DATCP worked with GrassWorks, Inc. Board of Directors and staff who partnered with grazing entities and experts around the state to plan, organize, and carry out a series of trainings and workshops for grazing educators from various agencies and organizations. These efforts included organizing and executing numerous train-the-trainer events during the grant period.

Project Objectives:

The goals of this project were to: 1) create a network or 'Community of Practice' that allows collaboration and communication among grazing educators throughout the region, 2) establish a conduit to provide local agency and non-profit staff access to research based grazing information and specialist expertise, and 3) provide training for grazing educators in effective adult education methods, including program planning and evaluation as well as the unique farmer to farmer learning that occurs within grazing networks.

Introduction:

Approximately 150 pasture walks are held each year in Wisconsin, but the quality of the educational experience provided can vary dramatically. At its best, a pasture walk blends farmer-to-farmer learning with the sciences of plant physiology and animal nutrition; at its worst, a pasture walk is simply a walk in the pasture. This project sought to merge the established informal communication and education mechanisms that serve grazing farmers with institutional research-based resources. Recognizing the strengths of both of these approaches, we created a structure that integrates them and provides agency and non-profit staff engaged in grazing education a forum for sharing ideas, information, and expertise. The participating grazing educators gained expertise in adult education and plant/animal science and learned to better facilitate farmer-led discussions.

UW-Extension agents, County Land Conservation and NRCS staff, experienced farmers, and others who work with graziers, all benefitted from the expertise others brought to the table as well as from access to research-based information tailored to their individual regions. This project continued a pilot project initiated by GrassWorks, Inc., Wisconsin's non-profit grazing farmer organization; expanding on that successful model with the goal of "leveling the playing field" so that a farmer in any region will have a similar high quality educational experience no matter whose pasture they're walking.

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Education & Outreach Initiatives

Objective:

Description:

Methods

WIDATCP works with GrassWorks who coordinated the planning team to develop topics and agendas as well as to identify training event speakers, dates and locations. GrassWorks secured meeting venues, communicated and coordinated speakers, publicized the events, tracked registrations, developed and processed event surveys, and coordinated many other workshop logistics such as providing nametags and handouts. In our capacity as Wisconsin's statewide grazing organization, GrassWorks served as a communications liaison between grass-based farmers and various agencies and organizations participating in the project.

Train-the trainer opportunities for 2014 are listed below:

- Several separate Train-the-Trainers sessions held during the GrassWorks, Inc. Annual Grazing Conferences in January 2014 (in Wausau) and January 2015 (in Wisconsin Dells).
- March 4, 2014: Workshop entitled *Understanding the Economics of Grazing* with 30 participants. Topics included a presentation by Dr. Allen Williams on the economics of grass-fed beef, and a presentation about the cost of production on pasture-based dairy operations by Tom Kriegel (UW-Madison Center for Dairy Profitability) & Mike Sabel (Mid-State Technical college instructor).
- June 18, 2014: Workshop entitled *Fine-tuning our Pasture Skills: Grass/legume ID, Weed Management and Estimating Cover* with 20 participants. This workshop included a morning classroom session and an afternoon "hands on" field trip that was made available to an additional 15 members of the Wisconsin Agriculture Educators Association. These high school and technical college Agricultural instructors concurrently held their annual conference and our grazing presentation was offered as a breakout session. The morning presentations included seeding mixtures and plant physiology, which was followed up by pasture scoring, weed ID and management and pasture plant ID in the field.
- October 16, 2014: Workshop entitled *Focusing on Using Legumes in Pasture Systems* with 24 participants. Topics included a presentation on legume establishment and contributions to the pasture system, contributions of legumes in pasture and a producer panel. The afternoon field component was held at the US Dairy and Forage Center in Prairie du Sac where participants were given a tour and participated in a discussion of current research. A special demonstration plot on how mob grazing can control Canadian thistle was showcased and the research was presented by a recent graduate student.
- Seven separate workshops and pasture walks were held throughout the state during the Woody Lane Wisconsin Tour, September 5-12, 2014 (see attached advertising flyer for details).

*activities prior to the ones listed here are reported in our previous annual reports

Outreach and Publications

This funding allowed needed basic revisions, re-printing, and distribution of 350 copies of the GrassWorks, Inc. *Grazing Guide: A practical manual for managed grazing*. Results of the project were disseminated at the 2015 state grazing conference and trainors who participated continue to network with experienced grazing educators, train new and upcoming grazing educators, and continue to implement grazing programs and provide technical expertise to dairy and beef cattle, sheep and goat farmers as well as the general public throughout the state of Wisconsin.

Outcomes and impacts:

This project established an information sharing network of partners in grazing education and construction of a sustainable physical and virtual network which meets their needs.

Our efforts also increased awareness of the strengths and qualities of both research-based information and farmer-to-farmer learning as demonstrated through survey

responses during the project. Each participant came to the project with a unique set of skills to share and skill-building needs so that everyone took home something that enhanced their skills as grazing educators.

We increased integration of resources and programming among all parties whose common goal is providing high quality education on managed grazing as demonstrated by survey responses of participants as well as by regional and multi-network collaboration (e.g. jointly hosting outside speakers such as Woody Lane), inter-network events, etc.

The Annual Grazing conference sessions were evaluated via the overall conference evaluation for and this information is available upon request.

The 2014 March, June and October workshops were evaluated using Survey Monkey:

March 4, 2014 – 30 educators attended and evaluation results are as follows: When asked to rate the usefulness of the ice breaker, 50% of participants rated it useful. The group was asked about their knowledge level of grass-fed beef economics and production, 61% answered they had some knowledge on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being no knowledge and 5 reflecting much knowledge). After the session, the knowledge increased to 70%. The knowledge base for the economics of dairy production was more diversified with 76% indicating none or some knowledge. When asked their knowledge level after the presentation, 84% felt confident in the knowledge they gained. Quality of the presentations was ranked high or very high by 100% of participants, with many of them writing down how they'll incorporate the ideas/strategies learned into their own grazing programs.

June 18, 2014 – 15 instructors attended along with 20 participants from County Land Conservation Departments, NRCS, UW-Extension, and local grazing educators. When asked to rate the quality of the active learning strategies – 89% of attendees rated it very high to excellent. One participant stated "I learned that I need a lot more practice."

October 16, 2014 – 24 educators/trainers attended. This workshop was held in partnership with the WI Forage Team and in conjunction with the UW-Extension Grazing Teaching and Evaluation conference. Evaluation results are as follows: When asked to rate their knowledge of legumes in grazing pastures, about 67% had some knowledge, yet after the presentation the percentage grew to 100% that had gained a lot to very much knowledge. This trend continued through the next two presentations on the contributions of legumes to pasture and the producer panel on how they utilize legumes. The overall quality of all the presentations were rated as excellent, especially the in-field demonstrations.

A survey was also distributed to those attending the statewide Woody Lane Tour trainings. Nine surveys were completed and the summary is listed below:

1. Identify your prior knowledge level of the topics discussed today.

Average Score: 6.5

2. Identify your current knowledge level of the topics discussed today.

Average Score: 9

3. Do you currently manage grazing lands? If so, how many acres?

3 - yes, 45, 67, 90 acres.

4. How would you rate yourself as a grazing lands manager?

Average Score: 8

5. What conservation practices do you feel best protect grazing lands health?

Perennial vegetation cover, reduced soil compaction, natural soil nutrient additions.

6. What conservation practices do you currently use on grazing lands?

Use warm-season grasses, fencing off streams, providing stream crossings, seasonal timing and rest interval between grazing events in paddocks, low or no fertilizer/pesticide use.

7. What is preventing you from implementing the conservation practices from question #5?

Educational resources and time.

8. What is the one thing you could implement that would make the most dramatic impact on your grazing lands?

Balancing the number of livestock feeding on healthy forage, getting water where it is needed, providing shade where needed.

9. Prior to today, have you attended an educational grazing lands management event? If yes, how recently?

2 - no, 7 within the last year.

10. What types and timing of educational grazing lands events would be of most value to you in the future?

2 - anytime, 7 - winter.

11. Are you aware of the 6th National Conference on Grazing Lands, coming to Grapevine, TX, December 13th-16th, 2015, hosted by the National Grazing Lands Coalition? (for updates please provide your email address in question # 13)

5 - no, 2 - yes.

12. Are you subscribed to the NatGLC's *The Grazing Land News* (eNewsletter)?

6 - no, 3 - yes.

13. If interested please provide an email address:

None provided.

14. What should organizations, such as the host of this event and the National Grazing Lands Coalition, emphasize during the next 5-10 years?

- Letting the public know about grazing as an environmental way to grow food and that grass-fed meat is a healthier choice.

- Providing educational resources for existing graziers to improve their practices and providing educational resources for new farmers to get their operations up and running.
- Helping GrassWorks, Inc. to continue educating farmers and consumers throughout Wisconsin and the Midwest.

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

See outcomes and impacts, potential contributions, and publications and outreach sections for more detailed accomplishments.

This project increased the competencies of our state's grazing professionals and helped create a permanent network for continued sharing of ideas and expertise. It generated increased interest in grazing and helped set the stage for increased future impacts on both an environmental and economic level. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to implement this program and are pleased with the results.

Recommendations:

Potential Contributions

Based on our efforts and feedback from the participants, we expect that the long-term benefits of our efforts to include 1) wide-spread availability of consistent, information-rich educational opportunities for farmers wishing to establish a pasture-based system or improve their existing system provided by a robust collaborative network of educators and technical assistance providers, and 2) as a result of building these resources and structures, the number of well-managed, pasture-based livestock farms will increase. 3) with the increase of well-managed grazing entities in Wisconsin, and the increase of knowledgeable trainers will come an increase in awareness of managed grazing in the state which will hopefully bring more funds to continue to grow this form of agriculture.

Future Recommendations

No two managed grazing systems are alike and no individual grazing system is static. Therefore, graziers must adopt lifelong learning strategies and adaptive management techniques. Graziers also need to collaborate with fellow graziers and educators and tailor what is learned from these individuals to their own goals, resources and management abilities. Continuing to facilitate train-the-trainer managed grazing resources is therefore crucial and funding for this continued effort must be secured long-term. With this goal in mind, DATCP will continue to assist organizations like GrassWorks, Inc. in linking farmers with the resources they need to be successful graziers and strive to provide leadership and education to farmers and consumers for the advancement of managed grass-based agriculture for the benefit of present and future generations.

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