

SARE Comprehensive Grazing Course: Turning Teachers into Learners

By Jennifer Colby published in the NODPA newsletter 2011

Through a SARE-funded project, partners in multiple states have joined together to deliver a training course focused on comprehensive, holistic grazing planning. While past models of grazing based on calculated average numbers and daily observation have led in many cases to improvements in water and soil quality and financial success, this model includes a focus on planning around farm family goals and needs, as well as new techniques and field-based practices. Groups of trainees in three locations (NY, PA, VT) have embarked on a six-training series taking place over 18-20 months, with the requirement that each trainee work with 2-3 farmers in the field concurrent with the training experience. Trainees are working with all types of farms, including dairy cow, dairy goat, and diversified livestock farms.



The VT training group, which I coordinate through the UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture's Pasture Program, includes trainees from VT, NY, MA, CT and NH. These trainees range from UVM Extension personnel to NRCS/NRCD staff, agricultural consultants, and farmers. The trainers have included project coordinator and NY farmer Troy Bishopp, NRCS conservation planner and Holistic Management educator, Phil Metzger, VT farmer Eric Noel and others. Training sessions have rotated throughout the state at several farms to vary driving locations, farm experiences and host farmer participation. As one host farmer described, "I thought yesterday's get together was great! I especially liked the part about the dirt and what we found and what we might want to do there. Lots to think about."

We have delivered two formal trainings and added a farm-based discussion group to talk about overgrazing, planning grazing and performing biological monitoring. The group has grown from the initial trainees to additional service providers, legislators/policymakers, training location hosts (farmers) who would like to learn more about these methods. They are very engaged. After attending one of the training sessions, a representative from SARE had this comment to share with us: "Expertise may take years of experience to develop, but I think your project and its approach are well designed to bring new holistic planning practitioners - even some of your experienced planners are new to the holistic approach - to a proficient level where they can work effectively and confidently with farmers, and begin to build the experience that can lead them toward expertise." As a site coordinator, and a participant, I am very excited to see that this process is turning teachers into learners. In my experience, when we are all learning together, we build a stronger network of support, curiosity and appreciation.

Grazing is one of those things that takes a few minutes to learn, and a lifetime to master. With a grazing basics presentation and some books, many farmers new to grazing take the plunge. In the first season, they may watch the grass and animal impacts with an intense eye, but over the years as patterns develop they will likely relax. Many graziers would like to pretend that grazing is all about flexibility and trying new things, but we are all human and some degree of repetition brings with it comfort and stability. There's nothing wrong with comfort and stability, as long as it doesn't interfere with our goals...and that's where this comprehensive grazing course, Troy's willingness to embrace challenge, and our brave trainees come together to serve farmers and help them meet those goals.

First, we started by learning how to work with a farm family to help identify and articulate their farm family goals. On the surface, this seems so simple and obvious as to be ridiculous, but in practice it's the very hardest thing to do. First of all, it takes time which is precious to both farmer and advisor. At a time when agencies and organizations have shrinking budgets, taking time to work with an individual farmer for long periods isn't typically viewed as being the most efficient choice. For the farmer, there is a constant struggle for "working" time vs. "planning" time. "Planning" time isn't perceived as being productive time, even though the act of planning can actually mean the farm is more productive, more financially secure and creates a higher quality of life for the farm family. These external (and internal) forces and perceptions make it hard to find or make the time to sit and talk together. Secondly, it's hard to ask personal questions without some time together getting to know one another first. Questions like, "as you look around your farm, what things excite you?" or "why do you want to direct market?" or "what do you want your community to look like after you are gone?". These questions seem simple on the surface, but they reach deeply into who we are as people; questions of core values, life, death and legacy. Essential to this goal-setting process is separating production amounts and articulating what a farmer does not want from what the farm family is actually working toward.

The goal setting has been received very positively by both sides of the project. As one trainee described, "My farmer visits have also been very positive. I am so excited for this experience; it is a very nice change of pace and farmer dynamic to talk with them about the whole by including the social piece. " Farmers are also sharing feedback: "I found the whole afternoon wonderfully productive and informative. The opportunities to spend that much time talking specifics about our farm with someone who is in such close touch with the latest developments on grazing management is absolutely invaluable."

After our initial work in developing goals, the group has received training in planned grazing and reading the biological landscape to assess how an understanding of ecosystem processes can help address challenges on the farm and measure their improvement. The group has also engaged in in-depth discussions about high density and taller grazing methods, using animals as tools to change the farm environment, managing livestock nutrition in a changing grazing system, practical definitions of overgrazing, paddock sizing, managing for birds and wildlife, planning forage needs around family events and priorities, and much more. 2011 marks the first full grazing season that the trainees have been working with their farms and there has been a lot to learn, on all sides.

The importance of this project is so much more than simply applying grazing mechanics and walking away. Signs of successful assistance will be measured by greater forage yield enabling less purchased hay, by reduced bare ground, by increased biodiversity, by loans either secured or avoided (per the farmer's goals!), by the ability to attend a family event off the farm, by healthier animals, by reduced electricity bills, and most importantly, by meeting the farmer where they are and helping them move toward where they want to be. There is no right answer in this process, only questions and suggestions to help move in the right direction.

Jennifer Colby is the Pasture Program Coordinator at the UVM [Extension] Center for Sustainable Agriculture. She has a B.S. in Animal Science and is currently a Master's Candidate in the UVM Department of Community Development and Applied Economics. Her thesis focuses on how management decisions effect measurements of success on grass-based livestock farms.