

## Grazing Success

By Robert Weaver, SWCD Contractor

The 2012 grazing season is quickly becoming a distant memory. Now is the time to begin looking ahead and planning for 2013. Unless you're a seasoned veteran grazer, waiting until April to start making grazing decisions will be difficult. We have to reflect on how grazing went in 2012. Whether it's dairy, beef, sheep, goats, or equine, what we did or didn't do last summer will affect how we deal with the upcoming grazing season.

When we look back, the questions are always easy to answer, whether we like those answers or not. Did I overgraze? Are my pastures so well eaten that they may take most of next season just to recover? Did I have a rotational grazing plan? Did I use it? How did grazing affect my financial goals? Did I document last year's grazing activity?

Reflecting on last year's grazing season, it is easy to see how the best laid plans don't always breed success. As I always say "If we dwell on negativity, success will never be within our grasp." All this philosophical jargon aside, as a grazing planner I would like to address a grazing success story from 2012.

Last winter our office received a call from Phil Hodgins of Fly Creek, NY. He explained how he and native resident Ed Leslie had teamed up to begin a cow/calf beef operation. Phil told me they had 50 beef cows on site and needed to know how to graze. My first impression was, "Oh boy, no fence, no water, no animal knowledge, the urban cowboys have invaded Otsego County." Forget first impressions, these beef farmers were well on their way to grazing success. Infrastructure, in terms of hi tensile perimeter fence was already in place, to the tune of over 100 acres, new wells were drilled to provide water, and wetland areas were carefully fenced out to protect headwaters of the Chesapeake Bay.

Needless to say, all this material stuff caught the eye of yours truly. Most of my planning meetings were with Phil, who relayed the information to Ed. Together we designed a rotational grazing plan tailored to their needs. Phil had no reservations when I suggested that we use his plan as part of a small farmer working group designing a grazing chart. With the help of grazing specialist Troy Bishop, Madison SWCD, we planned out a summer rotation for the grazing season to come.

Phil established grazing goals that we planned to incorporate into their grazing scheme. (1) Graze beef throughout the grazing season without supplemental feed, be it grain or hay. (2) Provide enough baleage and hay for winter feeding. (3) Stockpile pasture after August 16<sup>th</sup> to extend the grazing season.

As the grazing season neared, I laid out paddocks for interior fence divisions ready to graze. But the grass didn't cooperate. May came with little available pasture, so Ed took matters in hand and began grazing hay fields. He did a great job moving cattle through self-designed paddocks. The hay fields were not over grazed and the hay crop grew well. The boys were on their way with the 2012 grazing season. As the summer progressed, I thought Phil went into hibernation. I did stop by in the summer, plus a couple of drive-bys, to see Ed and briefly chat. The beef survived our 36 day dry spell and were still actively grazing. Ed had also made plenty of winter feed.

The leaves started to turn, and so to Phil came out of hibernation. A new job and a lost cell phone were the culprits of no communication. In the course of our conversation, he felt that the grazing plan got blown out of the water. It was here that I reviewed with Phil to determine if the grazing goals were met. (1) No extra feed during grazing. (2) Produce enough feed for winter. (3) Stockpiling pasture to extend grazing season. His answer was yes. Ed didn't exactly follow our designed plan, but neither did the weather. I explained to Phil that the plan and grazing chart were only tools designed to help improve grazing skills. Ed made management decisions, adjusting paddock size and rotation schedules to fit grass growth. The end result, the grazing goals in a challenging season, by two first year grazers were successful.

Good planning and common sense management spell success.

