Over the past year, Kendra Esparza-Harris, a doctoral candidate within the Center for Agroforestry, hosted producer-focused workshops funded by a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Graduate Student Grant (GNC22-347) to focus on information exchange between researchers and producers. A producer advisory group was created to counsel a field study designed to transition wooded paddocks to woodland silvopasture for integration into rotational grazing systems. In exchange, producers participated in focused workshops on different aspects of establishing and managing a woodland silvopasture. Current interest among producers in the adoption of silvopasture, especially by thinning forested areas to facilitate the growth of forage for livestock grazing, is constrained by lack of knowledge of best practices for establishing and managing a woodland silvopasture system. Thus, the project aimed to produce relevant research by incorporating producer feedback and to build capacity for application through technical transfer to producers.

Between August 2023 and June 2024, three workshops were designed around key management considerations in woodland silvopasture, including woodland management, prescribed burning, and forage establishment. To coordinate, Kendra collaborated with university personnel, non-profit organizations, and local production companies to organize farm tours and hands-on workshops within each management focus. The initial workshop included a farm tour of the Thompson Beef Farm by Stoney Coffman (Senior Farm Manager, MU Agricultural Experiment Station) and a woodland management workshop presented by Dr. Benjamin Knapp, (associate professor in forestry and interim director of the Center for Agroforestry), who addressed concepts of forest management and demonstrated tools and techniques for determining forest density and principles of forest thinning. A second workshop was led by Ryan Lueckenhoff (Ducks Unlimited Biologist and burn boss with the Mid-Missouri Prescribed Burn Association) at the University of Missouri Baskett Forest. Ryan discussed logistics in planning a burn, including creating a burn plan, showing participants equipment commonly used for burning, and reviewing site preparation and ignition techniques. The final workshop was held with Amy Hamilton (co-founder of Hamilton Native Outpost) in Elk Creek, Missouri. Amy and her son Colt (CEO, seed production & personnel) discussed their successes and failures of prairie, savanna, and woodland restoration, conversion to native grasses with cattle and buffalo grazing, and techniques of establishing and producing native seeds as a commodity.

Through these workshops, producers were provided a platform to expand their knowledge of woodland silvopasture management practices to optimize production and improve natural resource management. Producers gained the opportunity to build networks to support current or future implementation of woodland silvopasture within their operations. This project is an example of collaboration between researchers and practitioners towards participatory producer-led research and extension initiatives. Input from producer groups can highlight important practical aspects of woodland silvopasture for future research catalyzing sustainable landscape transformation and management within Missouri. Moreover, this model increases the capacity for supporting producers with demonstrations and educational opportunities, as well as peer-to-peer learning, and further technical training.

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