Photo Credit: Hanson Family Meats

February 2025

The Match Made in Heaven project seeks to understand the state of the art of livestock and crop integration on farms in the Upper Mississippi River Basin. This is one of six profiles of farmers who have honed their craft and successfully built livestock and crop integration systems on their farms. We hope you enjoy getting to know them!

Key Points:

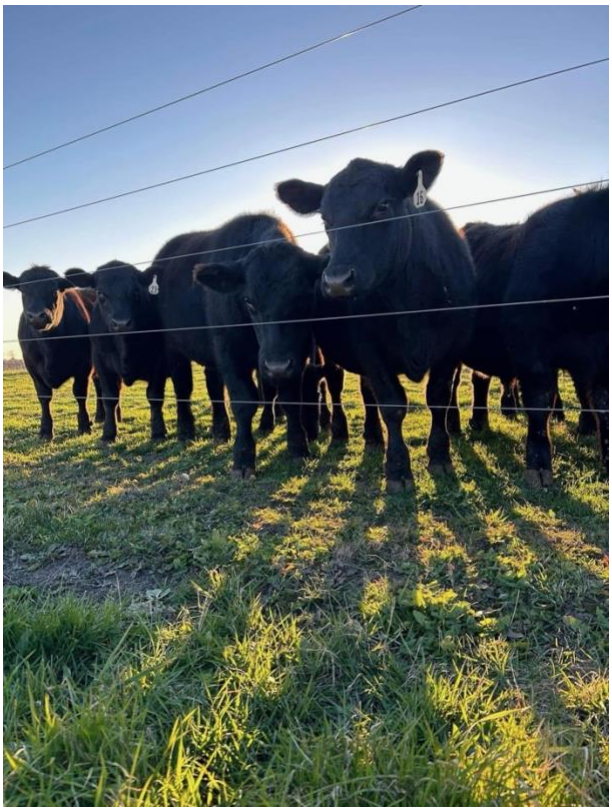
- Fourth generation beef cow/calf operation consisting of 60 cows and about 50 feeder calves each year, rotationally grazed.
- Farm consists of 686 acres, mostly rented; with 80 corn, 280 soybeans, 160 wheat, 76 pasture and an additional 160 of small grain (rye, barley, or wheat) harvested as baleage for forage. Cover crops are planted on all annual cropping acres.
- Daughter Maddie is a fifth-generation beef producer on both sides of the family. She is currently finishing out 70 beef animals per year and direct-marketing beef, with potential to increase production and sales.

Doug Hanson operates a diversified cropping and cow/calf operation in Iroquois County, Illinois. Of those acres, 76 are in permanent pasture and 600 are cropped annually in rotation. Rotational grazing of perennial pastures and cover crops is the focus of his cow/calf operation.

Doug and Lisa's daughter Maddie is now a 5th generation beef farmer. She started out with 22 feeder calves raised on the same farm as the grazing operation. After six months of doing this, she was fortunate to be able to purchase a 9-acre parcel of land nearby and grow the beef feeding operation to 70 head. Maddie also started Hanson Family Meats, a beef direct marketing enterprise that she operates out of a partitioned area of the barn on her property. Through Barn2Door, Maddie is able to have an online store where customers can place orders for all retail cuts as well as quarter, half, and whole beef. There is also a website and Facebook page for Hanson Family Meats. Every week, Maddie posts a "recipe of the week"

that features a certain cut of beef. Maddie married Joe Buckley in September 2024. Joe has been a big asset to the cattle and farming side of the operation, and he's the best taste-tester with all of the new recipes.

Maddie purchases all the suitable beef feeder calves from Doug's cow/calf operation, buys additional steers to fill out her 70-head feeding operation, feeds them to finished weight, and direct-markets as much of the beef as she can. Many farm families are looking for ways to bring a younger generation into the farming operation. In the Hansons' case, Maddie created her own set of new enterprises that complement and add value to the existing enterprises while also giving her full-time employment and a tidy profit. Doug says the dedicated market for his calves, created by Maddie's feeding operation, is what enables his cow/calf operation to be profitable.



Profitability of both Doug's and Maddie's operations is enhanced by their focus on reducing costs and maximizing the value of their resources. An example of maximizing the value of resources is the use of cover crops in the forage supply chain for the cattle. Cover crops provide tons of forage from the row-cropped acres. Doug says growing and grazing or harvesting cover crops on a 160-acre row-cropped section is like getting an extra 160 acres of production each year. The feeder calves are backgrounded on inexpensive cover crop forage before moving to Maddie's property to be fed to finish. Maddie takes advantage of inexpensive soybean hull byproduct from a soybean processing facility near her property, incorporating it into the ration for the feeder calves. She also uses free soybean hulls from the seed bean production at ProHarvest seeds were Doug works.

The grazing season on perennial pasture lasts around 180 days each year. Animals are rotated across paddocks, spending three to ten days on a paddock before moving. Rest period for paddocks between grazing events is 30-45 days. Stocking density is about 10,000 lbs. per acre. Productivity of animals is maintained by allowing pasture to rest when needed, managing through drought and keeping soils healthy. Doug values manure deposited on pasture by the grazing cattle to be worth around $4,000/year added value, or about $50 in manure value per beef cow per year.

In the non-grazing months, cattle not in Maddie's feedlot are maintained on a sacrifice paddock that has access to a feeding facility, including facilities to feed baleage and soybean hulls on covered concrete pads. This minimizes damage to the pastures and fields, and also minimizes feed waste.

Doug has an interesting approach to how he lays out his farm and cropping acres, which he calls the "Hanson 4-Square Farm Plan." He envisions his farm in four quarters. One quarter is for row crops, one quarter is for perennial pasture, a third quarter is for forage production, and the fourth quarter is for additional row crops and cover cropping. These quarters can be rotated every three to four years. Within quarters, crops on the cropping acres can be rotated, pasture can be grazed and rested, and cover crop acres can be grazed or harvested for forage.

There are costs to establishing Doug's "4-Square" vision. The main item is installing perimeter fence around each section, to enable rotational movement of cattle throughout the four quarters as the use of each quarter changes. Doug spends an estimated $2,000 per year in fence maintenance, $3,000 for water systems, $8,000 in added fertility to the pastures, and $1,000 for clipping weeds and unconsumed over-growth in pastures. Doug makes use of NRCS programs including CRP, EQIP, and CSP to assist him with this investment in managed grazing.

The Hanson operations involve a side business of show cattle. Doug grew up showing cattle at the county fair and Maddie showed steers all over Illinois as well as in other states. When Maddie was at her last cattle show before she aged out, she received the title of Grand Champion Steer at the World Beef Expo. Now, Doug and Maddie raise show cattle to sell to 4-H and FFA kids. With Maddie's show barn facility, she is able to have calving pens as well as a heated area to wash and work the cattle.

Can a beef enterprise be added to a cropping enterprise that already exists on a farming operation? Certainly. Doug approaches the beef enterprise with frugality, caution and honest assessment. With partnership from Maddie as a purchaser of calves, the Hanson farm has successfully integrated cattle and crops.

Closing thoughts:

1. Federal crop subsidies and crop insurance are mostly geared to corn and soybeans, with lesser amounts for small grain and very little for forage and cover crops. Farmers are disincentivized from doing what they think is best, because doing so might jeopardize the safety net that is provided for a limited set of options.
2. Farmers make choices based on what makes the most sense financially. There is significant risk in experimenting with systems and crops outside the farm bill programs. Bankers are also risk-averse and are less likely to offer financial support for farmers who wish to deviate from the norms.
3. Current USDA programs do not incentivize true regenerative agriculture. Significant policy changes are needed if federal programs are to effectively support regenerative farming. For example, if double cropping soybeans after wheat makes more money than planting cover crops, farmers are going to do the double cropping.

This material is based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under agreement number 2021-38640-34714 Am 3 through the North Central Region SARE program under project number LNC21-453. USDA is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.