

## Throwing Darts for a Healthier Landscape

### *Grazing Trainees Take Aim at Improving Pasture Management Decisions*

What do a retired NY NRCS employee, a permaculture consultant and a U.S. Senator's staffer have in common? Darts! This is no smoky bar room game, but an opportunity to learn more about reading a farm's landscape and monitor environmental and biological changes resulting from day-to-day farm management decisions. For many natural resource and grazing planners, these ideas are leaping off the page into the pasture as part of a NESARE-funded regional comprehensive grazing course.



On this sunny day in Highgate, VT trainees from four states join lead trainer Troy Bishopp and VT training coordinator Jenn Colby at Maplewood Organics to try their hands at sizing paddocks, moving cows and throwing darts. Host farmer Eric Noel has been using a planned grazing system for six years, focusing on high density animal impact and grazing the plants at a taller height to address his own farm and family goals.

Some of Noel's decisions mean his cows have cooler feet and greater comfort in the summer, nesting bobolinks have safe areas to raise their young, and the farm business is more profitable by using stockpiled pasture rather than purchasing stored feed. As Noel describes, he tries to bring the animals to feed, or the animals to pasture, and *"tries to eliminate starting the tractor."* His stockpiled feed strategy alone saved him nearly \$1,100 in winter 2010-11 feed costs.



After a morning session dedicated to understanding the farm's current grazing system and developing



the "grazier's eye" regarding how large to make a new paddock for Maplewood's head of 150 mixed age cattle, the trainees debate the workings of the four ecosystem processes integrated throughout the farm. Observing the water cycle, mineral cycle, energy cycle and community dynamics are ways to understand and identify areas where farming systems are working well and guide answers as to why they might not be. Effective breakdown of manure and plant matter, well drained pastures and fields, a healthy mix of plants are all indicators of well-functioning systems. Today, some of the more experienced trainees have a lively discussion about the benefits of dying plant matter, "litter", to the health of the soil. UVM Extension agronomist Dan Hudson provides plant identification assistance to participants interested in better understanding the plant colonies.

Once the basics were established, participants break into subgroups to practice throwing darts and assessing what's down at the soil level. Trainees are joined by additional Extension staff, a Holistic Management course trainee, and Jenny Nelson from U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' office. Each group is assigned to a different pasture in order to collect baseline information that Eric Noel will be able to use in the future to understand whether his decisions are improving or degrading his farm.

Moving along a straight line, one person throws a dart. The team hastens to see where the dart hit and fills out a worksheet detailing the type of material the dart hit, and spreads the plants apart around the dart to really look at what's going on. They record percentage of bare soil, plant species, presence of worm holes, soil type and more. This hands-on activity requires getting close to the soil and plants, and might lead to getting a little dirty. These trainees loved it. *"I found more things going on than it looked like to the casual eye"*, says Bruce Howlett, a grazing planner with MA NRCS. *"I really enjoyed seeing all the worm activity"*, says Dan Hudson.



Ending the day with refreshing mint and strawberry ice cream from Strafford Organic Creamery, the trainees are enthusiastic about the next training session. As part of the course, they are translating what they learn directly to farmers through a three-year intensive partnership. What's next? Whether throwing darts, driving posts, or discussing feed cost savings, we know there'll be a quiz on this.

*This training session was one in a multi-state series led by Central New York RC&D and funded through a Northeast SARE PDP grant. Planning materials and monitoring forms for use on any farm are available at [www.cnyrcd.org/planned-grazing-participants](http://www.cnyrcd.org/planned-grazing-participants). For more information about the project or other VT grazing-related questions, contact Jennifer Colby, UVM Center for Sustainable Agriculture's Pasture Program at (802) 656-0858, [jcolby@uvm.edu](mailto:jcolby@uvm.edu), or visit [www.uvm.edu/pasture](http://www.uvm.edu/pasture).*