

Healthy Pastures = Healthy Herds and Happy Farmers

By Troy Bishopp, Bob Wagner & Juan Alvez

Earlville, N.Y.—What’s more inspiring than green grass, sunshine and homemade ice-cream sundaes? Getting to share it with an exemplary organic dairy couple, David Stratton and Sarah Dalzell, a herd of beautiful cows and 60 passionate graziers on a picturesque evening in the hills of Madison County overlooking the headwaters of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.

The 200 acre, Stone Mill Pond Farm is home to a spring seasonal herd of 50 organic crossbred cows plus replacements that produce quality milk (8 years of consecutive super milk awards) for Organic Valley CROPP Cooperative on a 14 paddock system of rotationally grazed pastures, hay and baleage and a small amount of liquid molasses supplement. According to Dave and Sarah, “We are tight with our cows”.

Since 2003, Dave has strived to improve his bottom line by concentrating on soil health through a myriad of practices, amendment strategies, experiments and grazing management trials without the use of major tillage. “If your soil foundation is right, good things happen, said Dave. Over the years I have invested heavily in re-mineralizing my land by using gypsum, lime, chicken litter, foliar feeding organic premixes, spraying raw milk and spreading composted manure. I’m now aerating my swards and feel the “loosening effect” will benefit water retention and inject oxygen into the soil structure”.

To complement the soil building process, Dave employs a basic grazing strategy for his cows, in grazing half and leaving half while moving his animals to a fresh break multiple times during the day. “Moving encourages them to eat more and it’s an opportunity to observe for heats and study their grazing behavior. Managing for what the cow really wants tends to reduce stress and make for a healthier cow. I’m also learning to appreciate a few weeds (forage) in the sward which adds diversity to the diet along with their deep taproots bringing up valuable nutrients from the subsoil”, said Dave.

The plan must be working as soil organic matter levels have increased from 3% in 2006 to over 5% in 2012 with some fields approaching 9% as well as an increase in overall fertility. “We’ve also noticed just how this improved soil health has lowered our mineral bill while drawing in a vibrant host of dung beetles, earthworms, birds and beneficial soil life”, said Sarah.

As the large contingent of graziers stretched over several feet of laneway like a herd in of itself, Dave and Sarah were excited to show guests their sweat equity and tell of their experiences out in the field. The group gave the aerated pastures the cushion test and compared soil without it. They got to peruse the fine looking cows and see their grazing behavior after the poly-fence was moved. Queries arose on what constitutes a good grass to legume ratio, weathering the drought, pasture rest periods, seasonal production strategies, clipping, fertility spreading timing, cow health and infrastructure layout. A pasture walk wouldn’t be complete without farmers

questioning costs of everything from applying soil amendments to feed prices whereby stirring up discussions and thoughts to think about on the drive home.

A familiar sound bellowed (*Come Graziers*) from the valley to the hillside pasture instigated by Madison County's own, Grass Whisperer calling farmers down to enjoy 7 gallons of homemade ice-cream from Troyer's Country Store in Canastota, N.Y. with all the sundae toppings and 13 dozen cookies from the Kountry Kupboard in Madison, N.Y. in what is officially known as the "relationship building" part of any inspiring pasture walk. Conversations and sugar lasted well into the evening.

Praise from new-found friends included: "It was worth the long drive.", "I was so impressed by the quality of the cows without having any grain.", "Listening to Dave and Sarah share their experiences validates my own grazing management decisions.", "I could get used to this every week." Robert Yoder and Jim Weaver both summed up their appreciation of the evening by repeating, "Grazing is good for the soul."

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