Sustainable pastures education

Getting Started Grazing Case Study:
Jerry and the Heifers

Background

Jerry and his wife live on her family farm. They hadn’t had livestock on the farm in many years. Jerry is learning to farm, he has a successful market garden business along with an off farm job. He decided that custom raising the neighbor’s dairy heifers would be an appealing enterprise to add to his farming business. He wanted an enterprise that would complement others, such as free range egg production. Also, he and his wife wanted an enterprise with natural resource conservation benefits such as wildlife habitat and soil stabilization. Also, custom raising heifers relieved Jerry of needing to market any products, allowing him to concentrate on marketing his existing products.

Existing resources

Human capital

Jerry knew one of his richest assets was the group of people he knew. Jerry’s father-in-law grew up on the farm, knows farming and the land well. He also had equipment for Jerry to use for seeding new fields. Also critical to Jerry’s success were his fellow graziers. Already a SFA member, Jerry had met other graziers who are willing to share their knowledge with him and support him.

Land

Another benefit to Jerry was access to the family land, minimizing his expenses. He started with 24 acres, which had some perimeter fencing and holding pens. He originally calculated being able to graze 25 animal units on that land, which fit with the neighbor’s supply of heifers. Jerry did, however, need to invest in the infrastructure of the pastures such as interior fencing and waterlines.

There were a few old pastures and some cropland that he decided would work well for grazing the heifers. Jerry decided to graze them versus keeping them in a feedlot so he did not have to raise and harvest the grain and forage, letting the animals do the work sounded better.

Liabilities

Jerry did a careful assessment of what the weaknesses in his business plan were. Lack of grazing and animal care knowledge was a large risk that he knew he could only reduce over time. Having the strong network of support he knew would help with that risk management.

Jerry also knew that time available during any given day was limited. This was due to other obligations with other enterprises and his off-farm job. Also, he would be doing the work as other family members were unavailable to help. So finding an enterprise and management system that fit with his other duties daily and seasonally also was critical.

Lastly, financing was a liability as pay for the installation of the fencing challenge. Fencing is very expensive, but Jerry knew that investing in a quality fence that was installed correctly would save him time and money long term. To manage this, he worked with NRCS for cost share assistance with the fencing, and only installed one of two pastures. Once the first pasture fencing was paid off from income from the business, he could afford to install the second pasture.

Steps to meet goals

To get started he visited friends that were graziers and read every book he could find on grazing.

Getting started grazing

Getting set up

Deciding what kind of fencing to use and where he wanted it was hard. Jerry worked with his NRCS field staff to decide on grazing plan, do calculations, and determine what type of fencing to use. The factors he considered in selecting fencing included; materials eligible for organic certification, longevity of materials, ease of repair, installation cost and maintenance cost. In the end for perimeter fencing he decided to go with a system with posts that auger into ground and are fiberglass. He uses one strand of temporary fencing for interior paddock divisions. He can install three lines at a time. He runs two lines between permanent fence to create a paddock, then can add the third to make the next paddock, rotating them down a pasture.

In order to get his paddock system designed and set up, Jerry worked very closely with USDA NRCS grazing specialists. Jerry says they made all the difference in getting started. They were extremely valuable in walking through the calculations of number of paddocks he should have and also made it easier to explain his plans to his partners. The neighbor who owned the cattle and his father in law were both supportive and willing to work with him, but they didn’t know the system. So the plans Jerry developed help everyone understand what Jerry was trying to do.

Starting to move the animals

Did it wrong at first. Listened to the old way of starting out in the spring, when the grass is up to 4 inches he turned the cattle out. The grass was not ready yet and it didn’t regrow very well. Now he waits till a paddock is up to 12 inches and moves them when they graze it down to 6 inches.

Record keeping

Jerry has found recordkeeping very valuable for his operation. First of all, he gets paid per animal per day, so he needs to know when and where the animals are. Also, he is required for the NRCS EQIP and CSP programs to monitor the plants’ productivity. This has been very useful for Jerry in determining when to stop grazing the animals in the fall. This protects the productivity of the pastures the following season.

Where is he now?

It has gotten much easier for him to tell when to move the animals and how many animals the land can support. He has increased his herd size from 25 to 28 head. As for his rotation scheme, he is much more comfortable when knowing how to move the animals. Actually, since it grows so fast in the spring, he runs the cattle the cycle of paddocks in reverse the first time in the spring, then sends them back through the paddocks the other way the rest of the season. Now he gets three to four rotations through his pastures each season. The first rotation takes about 25 days through his 24 acres and the rest roughly thirty days. He is in the process of establishing more pasture land in land that is currently in row crop production.

What changed from original plan?

One of the biggest changes from the original design is changing the layout of the paddocks from more square to more rectangular. He said that the cattle move in them more that way, versus standing in one spot more in square paddocks. He feels this provides more even grazing and manure distribution. One reason Jerry was able to make this change was that his water line has many taps on it, allowing a great deal of flexibility with his paddock design.

More Resources

For more information on getting started with grazing and meeting other graziers can be found at the following websites:

* University of Minnesota Extension, www.extension.umn.edu
* USDA NRCS in Minnesota, www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov
* Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota, www.sfa-mn.org
* USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE), www.sare.org





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