

Up to Our Knees in Clover on the Dorrill Farm by Julie Best, Public Affairs Specialist, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Auburn, AL

John Dorrill of Pike County came from the land. However, he spent a lot of time away from the farm in his 44-year career with Alabama Farmers Federation. While working for farmers across Alabama, Dorrill continued to be involved with the production phase of farming. He partnered with a local producer and grew cotton, peanuts, and winter annuals. Eventually his Home Place of 80 acres grew to 330 acres through the acquisition of adjacent tracts of land. Mr. Dorrill later purchased his Clay Hill Farm consisting of 320 acres and set out to improve that parcel of land. He had an opportunity to purchase a 717-acre tract in the Shiloh Community and did so. “Even while I was still working, I spent a lot of my free time here on the farm,” says Dorrill. “I found the farm work very complimentary to my high pressure job. It would help me relax and not dwell on my job.”

When Mr. Dorrill retired, he came right back to the Home Place in the Pronto Community near Troy, Alabama. The Dorrills lived in the farm house on the place before building a cabin along with a “farm center” which houses offices, meeting rooms, storage areas, and a kitchen, all of which overlook a beautiful pond. The “farm center” is used frequently for farm, community, and family activities. John’s wife Carol loves the farms and assists in the daily management.

Mr. Dorrill has retired, but he still has a job. Today, his primary focus is the management of his farms in Pike County. He determined that livestock and timber production would be more suitable for his current situation and the future of his family than row cropping. He has a herd of



about 125 brood cows. “I have timber, hayland, pasture, and cows,” says Dorrill. “Everything is never exactly as it ought to be with farming, but we make do.” One way that Mr. Dorrill “makes do” is with overseeding his pasture and hayland for cool-season grazing.

On the Home Place, Mr. Dorrill has four pastures. He overseeds two of the pastures with a combination of arrowleaf clover and ryegrass. Dorrill plants the pastures using a rented no-till drill. He keeps the cattle in the other two pastures and feeds them hay during the winter



John Dorrill and Randy Hale, USDA-NRCS District Conservationist, Pike County (foreground), contemplate the possibility of overseeding the hay field.

months until the forage in the overseeded pasture is ready to be grazed. “I’ve been very satisfied with the outcome,” says Dorrill. He admits that last year was not typical. He normally overseeds in late October or early November. The growth of cool-season grasses and legumes is highly dependent upon soil moisture. “We had such ideal rains last year; it was almost like I had irrigation,” says Dorrill. “I grazed 25 cow/calf pairs on 15 acres until late June, and then the Bermuda grass came on out.” Dorrill gives the rain a lot of credit for the overseeding success last year, but he is quick to tell you that you have to have more than rain. Prior to planting, he applied lime and fertilizer according to soil test recommendations. He also grazed the pasture close prior to overseeding so there would be less competition with the winter annual seedlings.

Dorrill can list several advantages of overseeding: it involves minimal disturbance to the pasture or hay plants; it gives earlier cool-season grazing while the warm-season grasses are dormant; and it provides a good source of forage for a long while. “As soon as the overseeded

pasture comes in, I give the cattle free choice of hay or pasture. They soon prefer the grass to the hay. I believe it's a better quality forage than the hay," says Dorrill. Eddie Jolley, Agronomist



When given a choice, cattle soon select the overseeded pasture rather than hay.

with USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), says, "When a mixture of two or more annuals are used to overseed perennial warm-season grasses, the grazing season is extended, resulting in more total forage production per land unit, high quality forage, and more efficient use of

land resources. Adding legumes to a forage program can improve the forage quality, animal growth rates, reproduction efficiency and milk production."

To Mrs. Dorrill's way of thinking, overseeding has another advantage. "It's just pretty," she says. Legume pastures are generally very attractive to casual observers. "I had people stop and ask me what I had planted," says Dorrill.

According to John Dorrill, "Overseeding is a sound practice for me. Both the pasture and the hay fields did well after the overseeding. It's an economical practice, and I believe it definitely improved the quality of my livestock. I think the clover mixed with the ryegrass made the forage a little more palatable to the cattle. I give the rain a lot of credit for the success of my overseeded pasture last year, but you have to have more than rain. You have to have good forage."

The Dorrills have taken advantage of technical and financial assistance available to them through existing agricultural agencies and programs of the Natural Resources Conservation

Service and the Pike County Soil and Water Conservation District. Mr. Dorrill says, “I’ve been blessed. I enjoyed every day of my career. And now, I continue to work hard, but I’m not pressured. It’s a pleasure to work with my land and the cattle. I expect cattle to have a place on my farms for years to come.”

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