The Back Forty Has Changed by Julie Best, Public Affairs Specialist, and Sid Brantly, Range Conservationist, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Auburn AL

Leo Hollinger has a stocker cattle operation in Wilcox County, Alabama.

It's a wise individual who makes adjustments in life according to the current circumstances. Leo Hollinger of Wilcox County made some adjustments in his cattle operation about four years ago. They are adjustments that have the potential for being profitable as well as being aesthetically appealing. He converted some of his land to silvopasture.

Silvopasture is an agroforestry system that combines the sustainable production of forage and livestock with the growing of trees for timber products. The silvopasture system can be developed from a pasture system with the trees incorporated into the open fields or it can be developed from a forest plantation with the forage incorporated into the plantation following the thinning.

Mr. Hollinger has been in the stocker cattle and timber business all his life. The timber provides the accumulated equity and the cattle provide the household income. Silvopasture is appealing to Mr. Hollinger for a number of reasons. He has reached a point in his life where he wants to slow down just a bit. Hunting and wildlife habitat are important to him. Shade is important for the cattle and

A successful silvopasture requires understanding forage growth characteristics and managing the timing and duration of grazing to avoid browsing of young tree seedlings.

timber has always been a part of his farming operation. The silvopasture system offers all of those options.

A silvopasture system is aesthetically appealing, almost like a park.

According to Mr. Hollinger, "The basic appeal of the silvopasture system was getting a cash flow from the cattle during the time when there is no cash flow from the trees." The silvopasture system is designed to produce high quality timber while providing short-term cash flow from the livestock operation.

"Cattle in the woods is not a new concept," says Mr. Hollinger. "It goes back to the origin of the cattle business in this part of the world. It started with cattle in the open range, which in this area was woods. The cattle just salvaged what nothing else salvaged and recycled a lot of nutrients in some form or fashion and did it faster than it would have otherwise occurred."

Initially, Mr. Hollinger planted 20 acres of silvopasture, and he currently has about 70 acres. Trees were planted in sets of two rows of trees with a 40 foot skip between the sets. Lower limbs will be pruned as the trees mature. The entire silvopasture was planted to a forage crop.

Pastureland converted to silvopasture. As a silvopasture, timber and pasture are managed as an integrated system.

To allow the trees to get a good start, Mr. Hollinger suggests that the landowner use the wide skips for hay production or for something other than pasture for about four years. Mr. Hollinger has found that one profitable enterprise for the early years of the silvopasture system is watermelons.

Once the trees are well established, the cattle are introduced into the silvopasture. "Last night, I turned 40 head of cattle into a five acre field," says Mr. Hollinger. The cattle will be in the pasture for a very short time as part of a prescribed grazing system. Mr. Hollinger is convinced that silvopasture is a good practice. It provides good forage for the cattle, it's good for wildlife, and it's very aesthetically pleasing. "People like to be able to see through the woods, and they like to see cattle grazing. It's almost like a park," says Mr. Hollinger.

For more information about silvopasture systems, contact your local USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service.

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