

GOOD Grazing MAKES GOOD \$ense



David Surprenant
Dairy Grazing Operation
Kankakee County, Illinois

Time For A Change

For 60 years David Surprenant's father farmed 160-acres on a corn and soybean operation along with a dairy near Manteno in northeastern Illinois. After his father passed away in 1992, Dave took over the operation. He soon realized they weren't making enough to do more than make ends meet. After reading a magazine article about a grazing operation in the southeast United States, he decided it was time to do something completely different. It was at this point he first toyed with the idea of grazing his dairy cattle. In 1993 he planted his first 40-acre pasture and never looked back.

Whether he knew it or not, Dave's gradual transition to pasture by taking on 40-acre pastures at a time is, in fact, the best way to

learn how to manage a good grazing operation—a little at a time.

With ample amounts of curiosity, persistence, and patience, Surprenant's formerly tilled, black soil corn plots were transformed into high-quality pastures that grow more grass and forage than his cows can eat. He was able to double his herd size and lower his costs.

"Our herds are happy with this rotational grazing system," Dave explains. "They are healthy, my ground is in the best shape imaginable, and our operation is back in the black and making money."

Learning Never Stops

In order to find this success and become a 'local authority' on grazing, Surprenant confirms there was a great deal to learn. In fact, he's STILL learning, as he's found again and again that learning is a continuous process. Grazing requires less labor but it actually takes more brain power, more management and more knowledge of legume and grass species.

"It took a few years for me to learn the in's and out's of the grasses. And it took time for the grass to become well established. But now everything is functioning at an optimal level. My cows and I are now very well trained in the art and science of good grazing," says Dave.



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It takes good planning and good strategizing to make a grazing plan work. Graziers must develop a workable and well-designed system, complete with all the fixin's and infrastructure needed, including fencing, permanent travel lanes, water lines, and other time-tested pasture tools.

One issue he needed to address was long-term stability for his grass. *"We needed moisture badly and decided to incorporate an irrigation system. That was a pricy investment, but it's been great for the grass, great for stabilizing our grass growth,"* Dave explains.

Tap Into Resources--And Friends!

Suprenant agrees he could not have found all the answers and gained the technical know-how to create this without input and the chance to 'pick the brains' of others who had gone before him. Attending grazing conferences and events through the Illinois Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI), University of Illinois Extension educators, and visiting with other graziers over the years was critical. According to Suprenaut, it's important to know who to talk to and where to get the tools you'll need for good conservation grazing solutions that work.

"We've learned how to be good grass farmers," Surprenant explains. *"It's about getting back to the basics for us—grazing is the oldest way to feed livestock and it's really the most economical way too."*

Additional Information

If you need more information about grazing and programs, contact the NRCS District Conservationist at your local USDA Service Center (listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture), or contact your local soil and water conservation district. Information also is available on the web at: www.il.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/.