

Iowa CONSERVATION Showcase

‘Good Fences Make Good Neighbors’

When Robert Frost wrote “Good fences make good neighbors” in his 1914 poem “Mending Wall”, he was referring to neighbors respecting each other’s property. The line from that nearly century-old poem certainly rings true for Polk County cattlemen Mike Sweeney and John Olmstead. But these Mitchellville neighbors are not only respecting each other’s property, they are *sharing* each other’s property.



In 2004, Sweeney signed an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contract through the U.S. Department of Agriculture to install a multi-paddock rotational grazing system on his 70-acre pasture.

He needed a way for cows to access water in each paddock, and two livestock crossings on Camp Creek, which runs through both Sweeney’s and Olmstead’s properties. Last year, Olmstead signed a similar EQIP contract.

EQIP is a voluntary program administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that offers financial and technical assistance to install or implement structural and management practices on eligible agricultural land.

The best location for one of their livestock crossings was on the property line. “We had been discussing it for about a year or two,” said Sweeney. “We both fought the same fence because the (Camp Creek) banks are so steep there. I approached John about doing a double-wide (crossing) down there. I knew I needed a crossing there, and he knew he needed crossings with his new paddock system.”

Construction on the shared livestock crossing was complete in 2006. NRCS Soil Conservationist Ryan Gerlich says Sweeney and Olmstead installed an impressive crossing. “By working together to combine resources, Mike



This double-wide livestock crossing on the Sweeney- Olmstead property line was constructed last year, so both herds can utilize it. Heavy rains in early May caused some rock to wash away and sediment runoff.



and John built a Cadillac livestock crossing at about 80 percent of the cost of constructing two separate crossings,” he said.

Olmstead said it took a lot of dirt work to construct the crossing, but in the end it makes sense. “It saves us money, and the boundary between our two farms was the logical place to put a crossing,” he said.

Sweeney admits his baby calves were a little confused the first time they used the crossing. “The first time I opened that gate for them the cows streamed right on through just as anxious as can be, but the baby calves all went under the electric fence wire into John’s farm and followed his fence all the way up. So, I had about 15 to 20 calves on the wrong side of the fence. Next time they won’t do that; they’ll learn,” he said. “It only takes one electric wire to make John and I happy. If someone else moved in, they may not have that same feeling.”

Olmstead said he appreciates his neighbor. “A lot of people don’t want to spend money on these fencing projects and conservation projects,” he said. “Having a neighbor who will work with you and get something done is valuable. Mike’s a good neighbor.”

Why rotational grazing?

The 52 year-old Sweeney entered the cattle business just six years ago. He’s currently a cattleman on the side, working full-time for Mid-American Energy Company. Sweeney learned fast that rotational grazing is the best way to get more production from his 70 acres.

“My incentive is to get more production. If I could add 30 to 50 percent more cows, that would be really cool,” he said. “(With the multi-paddock system) I can see that I am getting full utilization of the grass. Before, I wasn’t making good use of the forage.” Sweeney currently rotates his 25-head of cows through seven paddocks. He hopes to add a few more paddocks by switching crop and hay ground to pasture, and steadily increase his herd.

Olmstead has about 40 cows on his 75 acres of pasture. He had been doing some rotational grazing. His entire paddock system is set to be completed this summer. “This new fencing will fine-tune the rotations,” he said. “When I get all of the fencing in, it will be more of an intensive grazing program.”

Other benefits of multi-paddock rotational grazing:

- It allows pastures to rest and allows for re-growth.
- It can provide for a longer grazing season, reducing winter feed.
- It more evenly distributes manure throughout the paddocks.
- Weeds and brush are usually controlled naturally.
- It usually increases stocking rates and livestock seem more content.

Watering System



To provide water to cows in three of seven paddocks, Mike Sweeney used a tile line from his pond and an ag waterway to animal powered nose pumps. Sweeney, left, shows NRCS Soil Conservationist Ryan Gerlich how the pumps work. In the other four paddocks, the cows have access to water in Camp Creek at the crossing locations.

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Along with the initial cost for fencing materials, a disadvantage of rotational grazing is the cost of supplying a water source to cows in each paddock. Sweeney used the two crossings over Camp Creek to provide water to four paddocks. In the other three, he was able to utilize a tile line that runs from his pond and a tile line that runs from his nearby agricultural waterway to install animal-powered nose pumps.

This past winter was the first time Sweeney's cows used the nose pumps. "It takes no energy to heat and no energy to run the pumps," he said. "After a little bit of 'training' the cows used this water really well. It worked just great!"

Olmstead never felt like Camp Creek was a good, reliable water source for his cows. "The creek goes dry long before the tile line does," he said. "If the tile line is dry, then we've had a real dry spell."

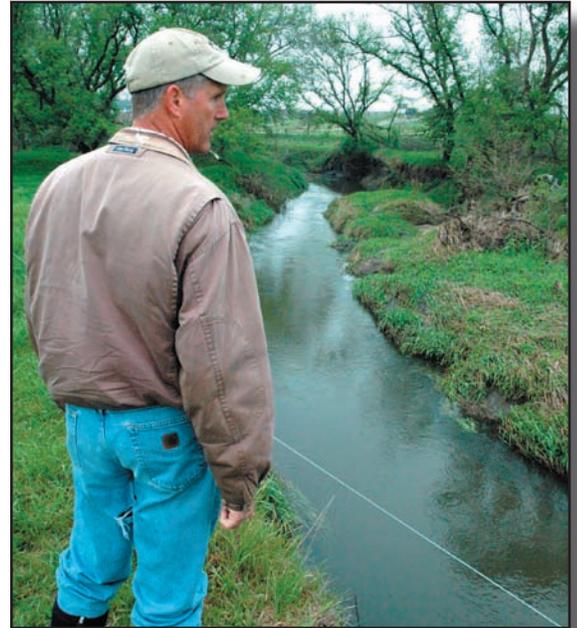
Fencing Off Camp Creek

With his new multi-paddock system, Sweeney fenced out about 26 acres of creek and forestland, an area where his cows used to wander. But he believes in protecting the creek from further pollution and bank erosion. "I can already see, just this spring, changes happening on the stream banks," he said. "I can also locate the cattle much easier during critical management times."

For more information about EQIP and grazing systems, contact your location USDA Service Center or go online, www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/stateeqip.html.

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Sweeney fenced off all access to Camp Creek on his property from his cows, except for the the two crossing locations. He did this with cost-share assistance from the USDA's EQIP.

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