

# Iowa CONSERVATION Showcase

## Retired Teacher Converts to Full-Time Cattleman

In the spring of 2006, after teaching mathematics for more than 30 years in Lamoni, Ankeny, Underwood and Harlan, Tom Pattee decided to put down the chalk for good and become a full-time cattleman.

When his father-in-law retired in 1980, Pattee started farming and grazing cattle part-time on his father-in-law's property near Avoca. Now Pattee runs a cow herd of mostly commercial Angus on about 100 acres of rough, hilly pasture.

The last few years Pattee researched ways to expand his cow herd, knowing he would soon retire from teaching, and find a way to keep his cattle out of a creek that runs through the pasture. "I wanted to increase the cow herd, and I thought I could get better use of the grass," he said.



Tom Pattee

### Multi-Paddock System

In 2004, Pattee got help from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office in Harlan. Luke Zaiger, soil conservation technician with NRCS, recommended Pattee switch from a continuous grazing system to a multi-paddock rotational grazing system.

Multi-paddock rotational grazing is a system where livestock are moved often from paddock to paddock, according to forage use and allowing for rest periods. "The advantage of a paddock system is high forage production and use per acre, plus pastures can be rested and grazed more efficiently," says Zaiger.

"I had done some paddock grazing in the past," said Pattee. "Luke designed the system to cut down on some trails. There are some terraces out there, too, so they dictated how the paddocks were designed."



*Pattee runs just 43 cows on 100 acres of rough, hilly pasture near Avoca. The multi-paddock system will allow the pasture to be grazed more efficiently.*

## Iowa CONSERVATION Showcase



To help pay for the multi-paddock system, Pattee signed a contract through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) in 2004, which paid 50 percent of the cost of electric fencing and watering system. EQIP is administered by the NRCS.

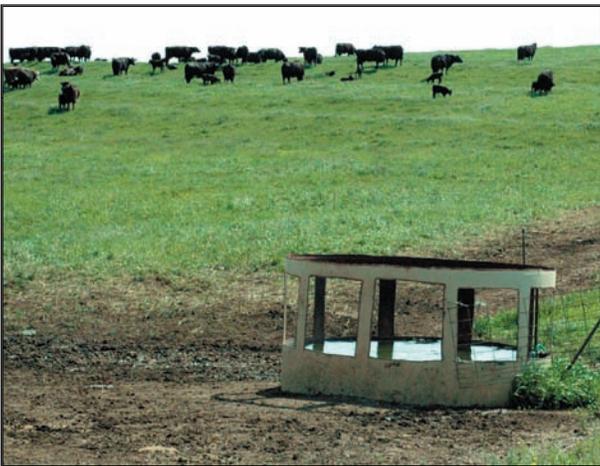
Other advantages of a multi-paddock grazing system include better weed and brush control, more evenly distributed manure throughout the paddocks, increased stocking rates and more forage options.

Zaiger said Pattee's situation was unique in that he had excess forage that could be hayed. "Tom needed more movement from his herd," he said. "Usually it's the other way around; more often I see overgrazing of pasture."

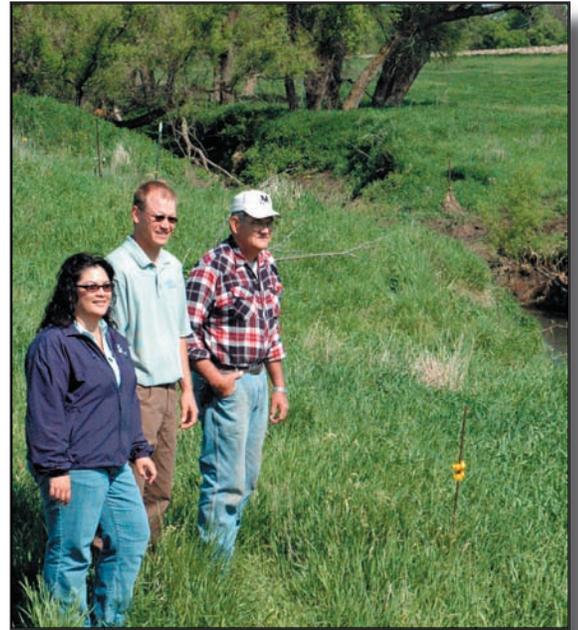
The electric fences and watering system were complete and ready for Pattee's cows in 2006. He rotated them every couple weeks last year. This year, Pattee started rotating them more often to obtain more uniform grazing. "I've been cutting them to about a week in each paddock," he said. He currently rotates 43 cows between five paddocks, each 10-15 acres.

### Watering System

A common challenge with any new paddock system is finding the best location to place water for the cows. Considerations include water sources, herd size, time and costs. For Pattee, it was decided that a centrally located stock tank, accessible from three paddocks, was a low-cost, low-maintenance solution.



Cows can access this watering tank from any of three paddocks. This was a low-cost, low-maintenance solution for Pattee.



Since Pattee fenced off the creek that runs through his pasture, he has seen vegetation protect the streambanks like never before. Pictured are (L-R) Shelby County District Conservationist Angela Biggs, Soil Conservation Technician Luke Zaiger and Cattleman Tom Pattee.

Pattee thought the creek running through his pasture would be a sufficient water source for the cows from the other two paddocks. It has worked okay, but Pattee wants to improve that part of his watering system, so he signed a 2007 EQIP contract to install two low water crossings on his creek. Cows will be able to easily access stream water when construction on the low water crossings is complete, later this summer.

"We try to place water no more than 600-800 feet from anywhere in a paddock," said Zaiger.

### Fencing

Pattee says his cows responded well to the electric fences. "I've got ten first calf heifers and they follow on through," he said. "We've about gone through one complete rotation already."

Included in the fencing project is 3.1 acres of use exclusion from the stream. Pattee said he fenced off the stream to prevent soil erosion, keep the water clean and to protect his herd's health. "Every year I would have four or five cows with foot rot, and it was mainly from standing in the water on a hot day," he said.



### Cropland

In addition to his grazing land, Pattee owns about 70 acres of cropland—30 acres of hayland and 40 acres of corn and soybeans. “The corn and hay stay with us,” said Pattee. “We run them through two Harvester silos.”

Pattee says his rough, hilly grazing land will stay as cow pasture. “There have always been cows on this ground, and that’s the way it should be,” he said. “With corn prices so high, there’s too much ground coming out of pasture that should remain as grass.”

To learn more about multi-paddock rotational grazing or EQIP, visit your local county NRCS office.

*By Jason Johnson, Public Affairs Specialist  
USDA-NRCS, Des Moines  
May 2007*

### *Helping People Help the Land*

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.



*Luke Zaiger (left), soil conservation technician in Harlan, talks with Pattee about the multi-paddock grazing system he designed.*