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Grazing Sheep is a Learning Process

Sometimes our interests as youngsters continue into adulthood. Such is the case with Elton Mau, who became interested in sheep as a 4-H project and now operates an 80-acre farm in McLean County where he grazes sheep. "When I started out, I wanted to have sheep," said Mau. "I wanted to raise my kids around livestock and I wanted to graze them."

The farm he bought had seven acres of grass and the rest was in corn and soybeans. He worked with an Extension Service sheep specialist to develop pastures and plan for the future. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has supported Mau for several years, providing technical assistance on his grazing operation.

Today, about 40 acres are now in permanent pastures. The trick is knowing what you want to graze and at what time. Mau consults with other graziers often, attends conferences and meetings, and reads books on grazing. "It's the people you get to know," said Mau. "I've been just about all over the United States looking at graziers and grazing operations."

Mau started with Rambouillet sheep, but has moved to Dorset sheep with a Booroola sheep gene. He selected Booroola sheep as they have a natural tendency for multiple births. On average, he carries about 100-125 ewes and 160 lambs. He breeds the ewes in December, trying to keep lambing in sync with nature. In the spring, he will supplement hay as needed for his ewes before lambing.

The previously established pasture is a mixture of bluegrass and orchard grass, and Mau added red and white clover. For other pastures, Mau seeds a novel endophyte Fescue and clovers with combinations of annual forage mixtures of cereal rye, oats, turnips, and radish. He plants pearl millet for warm season pastures.

Mau grows corn, soybeans and wheat, each on 15 acres and rotates crops every year. However, he grazes all acres at some point during the year. "I plant what I call my annual fall mix after the wheat harvest," said Mau, "That's your cereal rye, oats, red clover, white clover, turnips, and chicory. And we planted all this with a drill." In the fall, he flies on annual cereal rye over his standing corn. One 15-acre pasture will have 10 acres of pearl millet and 5 acres of turnips, so he can graze the turnips separately.

Mau has limited erosion problems on his land, but he has been able to control it by interseeding the pasture mixes into the cropland and by installing grassed waterways. Keeping the ground covered in plants all year helps prevent erosion. It also improves the soil.

"That's the whole thing about doing this grazing, especially with the sheep," said Mau. "I have noticed drastic increases in the birds and bees and plants that grow around here."

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Mau pays attention to parasite worm load in his pastures. Ideally, he won't put the sheep back in a pasture for 45-60 days and will incorporate hay, which helps remove the parasite worm load. "Another reason I use my annuals," said Mau, "is because you have a longer timeframe from the time I move them in and out." He says he replants the pasture after grazing and by the time the annual forage is tall enough to graze again, it's been around 60 days.

Sheep handle the brush and weeds in Mau's pastures. He grazes other farms during the year and once caught the sheep eating Mulberry trees. "All my sheep were lined up along that fence line," said Mau. "In two days, the sheep had eaten every leaf off all those Mulberry trees." The same goes for weeds. The sheep will eat the leaves off pigweed and lambs quarters and just leave the stem.

Another lesson Mau learned was the importance of proper watering system placement. He found if you use a dog waterer system, the lambs won't stand in there, compared to a water trough. Also, he discovered when the watering system was placed too close to his electric fences, stray voltage was shocking the ewes.

"I replaced the metal gates with wooded gates, and the first sheep came up and took a long drink," said Mau, "That was the first time I had even seen them drink." Now that the ewes are drinking more water, he's seen a significant decrease in deaths of healthy lambs at birth.

Mau uses electronet fencing at a 32-inch height to create paddocks. These are similar to a woven wire fence, but made out of polywire. His paddocks are different sizes, depending on the time of year and number of animals. "You can make your paddocks any size and they carry voltage very well," said Mau. "And it keeps the coyotes out and the guard dog in."

Mau continually looks for improvements and plans for the future. He hosts pasture walks, soil health workshops, and makes presentations at grazing events. Mau continues to work with and trade information with NRCS on soil health and grazing concepts and ideas. He keeps extensive records to track all his activities with the final analysis being the health of the sheep.

"I have a Rubik's cube I use sometimes., said Mau. "There's like a million and three-hundred thousand ways of solving a Rubik's cube, and that's what we have here."

To learn more about grazing options for your operation, call your local NRCS office today or visit ***www.il.nrcs.usda.gov.***

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