Grazier finds Diversity in Fields a Bonus

Jared Namken and family’s farm lies in the northeastern part of South Dakota in the Coteau Hills area with a crop and cattle operation. Namken says he has a purebred business, along with commercial cattle that are finished through the feedlot. “We do no-till, cover crops, and pasture rotation,” said Namken. “I am the fourth generation; my son is the fifth. Our family farm is over 100 years old now.” His father started experimenting with no-till back in the early 1990’s.”

They plant cover crops of a diverse mixture after small grain, which allows them to graze cows on the cropland. Namken said, “Adding diversity along with improving soil quality allows us to rest our pastures which we already rotate.” The pastures are subdivided for the rotational grazing system. “We have piped in water by installing water tanks and rural water pits on the edge of our pastures,” Namken explains. “We use above ground pipe to get our water source to field edges so we can graze.” They installed perimeter fence around the crop fields, mostly high tensile with some barbed wire.

The registered cows calve the first of March, while the commercial cows calve approximately the 10th of April. Namken said, “We calve in small pastures and try to keep everything outdoors if we can, weather permitting.” They have started using some annual forages. On one field, they planted teff grass as a trial. They will hay it at least once and graze it or hay it a second time depending on the fall.
“Economic viability is crucial with the declining prices, so the cover crops have given us another option,” said Namken. “Letting cattle graze cropland residue has greatly helped the feed situation and the bottom line. We have seen a greater diversity in our pastures, I believe it is because of cover crops. The time spent grazing cover crops and crop residue has given our pastures a proper resting time.”

Soil temperatures have been lower too. The temperature could be 90 degrees and with cover crop, the ground surface would be 10 degrees cooler. They have also seen the soil has increased biodiversity and organic matter.

With cover crops and no-till they have seen better infiltration, a lot less runoff. Namken said, “We’ve seen a big increase of earthworms. That’s all due to leaving the residue in place.” They installed filter strips, grass waterways, shelterbelts, and plant annual forages in the spring to help with the runoff. Namken continues, “We have native pastures and introduced species pastures, but I’ve seen a big difference in the native grass over the introduced species.”

Namken said they started this whole process with NRCS through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). “We started through our local conservation district,” Namken said, “and that’s how we started planting trees and then came all these other management practices.” He

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- Jared Namken, landowner

Jared Namken says healthy soils bring diversity which is the key to productive land, healthy cattle, and variety of wildlife.

said they have seen a great increase in wildlife, birds, and deer, everything you can think of has increased since they have added these practices.

The South Dakota Grasslands Coalition was helpful with educational resources as well as the South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service, that provided information needed to get questions answered.

The benefits of the native grass are obviously more wildlife, more diversity, and not just cattle or a certain species. Namken said, “You get a variety including insects, pollinators, deer, and all kinds of wildlife. It is critical, the more diverse your wildlife, animal, and insect population is, the better your ecosystem is.”


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