USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Vernon County Success from the Field

Converting Cropland to Rotationally Grazed Pasture Conserves Soil and Provides Forage for Pollinators

Kevin and Carolyn Parr operate Harmony Hills Farms, an operation in Harmony Township west of Viroqua, Wisconsin, that they purchased from Kevin's parents in 1986. For years, he farmed the steep slopes in the Driftless area utilizing a crop rotation that was heavy on hay and utilized other soil conserving practices such as contour farming and strip-cropping. A few years ago, however, he decided to convert some of his cropland into rotationally grazed pasture.

Soil Conservation Technician Tom Kreuzer was no stranger to Harmony Hills Farms. When Kevin looks back at his records he sees many projects that he has worked with Tom on, including contour strips, barnyard runoff and pond structures. In 2015 while Kevin was having a conversation with Tom he learned that he could get technical and financial assistance to convert some of his cropland to pasture through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), a voluntary conservation program administered through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). EQIP assisted Kevin in implementing an intensive rotation grazing plan by providing assistance with the prescribed grazing plan, fencing, livestock pipeline, forage and biomass planting and watering facilities.

"Converting cropland into rotationally grazed pasture provides numerous benefits to both the land and the producer," said Sam Skemp, District Conservationist with the NRCS. "By converting the land into a less intensive land use, soil erosion, soil quality, water quality and even wildlife habitat can be improved. If one includes white clover in the mix for Forage and Biomass Planting and utilizes a rotational grazing system, the clover is allowed to go to flower, providing forage for pollinators as well as beef cattle. Many producers also find rotationally grazing beef cattle to be a profitable venture."

Kevin's EQIP contract was funded through the Honey Bee Pollinator (HPB) Initiative. The HBP Initiative was created in response to Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD), a phenomenon where honey bee hives had high rates of failure. One of the proposed causes for CCD was a loss of habitat. The HBP Initiative promotes practices that will help to benefit hive nutritional health by increasing the availability of forages that have low or no pesticide exposure.

Kevin converted over 100 acres from cropland to pasture through two different EQIP contracts. The newly seeded in land not only provided enough forage for the 40 or so cow-calf pairs that graze the land, it also provides critical habitat for both native and non-native pollinators.

Kevin grazes 40 cow-calf pairs over 100 acres in Harmony Township, west of Viroqua, Wisconsin. He started converting cropland to pasture in 2015.

Kevin sees results from his rotational grazing system, most noticeably a reduction in soil erosion and an increase in soil quality, including an increase in organic matter and a decrease in soil compaction. He plans on expanding his grazing system and converting even more of his cropland into rotationally grazed pasture.

"I could not be happier with the conversion to rotational grazing," Kevin said. He has since added Carolyn's two sons, Jeremy and Justin Halvorson, to the farm continuation plan. They have ten grandchildren who have all shown interest in the farm in various ways. The other day, Kevin's grandson, Caleb, who is three years old, was with him when he was rotating cattle. Kevin asked Caleb what he wanted to be when he grew up. Caleb said he wanted to be a farmer.