A professor learns some lessons as a new farmer

CASTLEWOOD, Va. – Like most Natural Resources Conservation Service employees, staff in the Lebanon Service Center welcome calls and walk-in visits from local farmers. Their experience with Richard Moyer, however, was a little different because his first contact with NRCS came before he owned a farm.

In 2007, Moyer was a full-time professor of molecular biology at King University in Bristol, Tenn. He and his family lived in Bristol but decided they were ready for a fairly radical change. The Moyers wanted to try farming, with the goal of producing enough to meet their own needs and selling their surplus to supplement income from Richard’s reduced teaching hours.

“I didn’t know that much about farming, but I have eyes and I could read,” Moyer said. “I knew how to pick up a telephone, to call someone and to ask a question. One of my first calls was to NRCS.”

While Moyer was scouting available land in Russell County, he learned that NRCS could provide soil surveys for most of the properties he was considering. After reviewing the data with NRCS grazing specialist K.D. Cook, Moyer focused on a parcel the Jessee family had owned since the 1700s and wanted to keep in agricultural use.

Ambitious plans

The purchase set the scene for another burst of consultations and activity. Moyer’s plans for the 72 acres included a beef herd, a smaller dairy herd and fruit and vegetable production. He also needed to get the historic home on site move-in ready for his wife Ginny and their six children.

Moyer faced an initial setback when an NRCS soil specialist found a field he’d marked off for vegetables was so lacking in nutrients and a few seasons of replenishment were needed before anything could be done with it.
profiles in soil health

Richard Moyer, Virginia

“I learned that rebuilding and maintaining soil health are constant processes,” Moyer said, “but that ‘dead’ field is one of our most productive now.”

Almost immediately, he began the three-year transition process that now allows him to certify all his fruits and vegetables as organic. This step was intended to help him reach a larger goal of improving soil health on every acre.

Early awareness

“It is unusual for someone to consult with us before they’ve purchased any land,” said Wess Stanley, district conservationist in Lebanon. “But Richard realized that soil health was going to be important to everything he did.”

As a beginning farmer on land that was getting its first real exposure to conservation practices, Moyer was eligible for additional funding under the NRCS’ Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to install recommended practices.

“One of the first needs we identified was excluding cattle from our woods and water,” Moyer said. “Even before we brought in the cattle, we knew we’d need a lot of permanent fencing and then temporary fencing for rotational grazing.”

Ultimately, Moyer installed 2.5 miles of fencing, 1.2 miles of livestock pipeline, six watering troughs and a pumping station with EQIP funding. With a managed grazing plan, his herd of about 40 beef and dairy cattle are thriving on only 34 acres with no access to streams, ponds and about 30 wooded acres.

On his vegetable plots, Moyer intercrops to make the most of limited real estate. Shorter plants such as lettuces are allowed to sprout in the shade of taller plants like tomatoes. Idle fields are always cover-cropped and all fields are either untilled or vertically tilled using a chisel plow.

On Tuesday afternoons and Saturday mornings, Moyer and available family members head to the farmers market in Abingdon to sell what’s not needed for the family pantry. With only the two youngest of his six children remaining on the farm full-time, Moyer partially compensated for the loss of family labor with a volunteer intern last summer. She’d heard about his activities and wants to replicate some of them on her family’s property.

“Word’s getting around that Richard knows what he’s up to and that he’s getting good results,” Stanley said. “A lot of people talk about doing what Richard’s doing. While most just talk, Richard put his plans into action.”

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Left: Richard Moyer confers with Wess Stanley, NRCS’ district conservationist serving Russell County. Right: Moyer’s produce on display at the farmers market in Abingdon.
(photos by John Markon, Virginia NRCS)