Grazier Goes to School to Improve Forage Production

Much like the oral traditions of Native American peoples, farming knowledge and skills are often passed from one person to another. Justin D. "J.D." Hill has been both a mentor and mentee in managing his cow/calf operation with 90 brood cows in Carroll County, Virginia.

Though he came from a farming family, J.D. knew that he needed to become a student to realize his vision of a more productive and profitable business that could support him in retirement. His operation encompasses 390 acres on four farms and five tracts, so he had a lot of ground to cover to make it more sustainable.

No Place Like Home

J.D.'s first exposure to conservation came through his father and the Soil Conservation Service (now NRCS). His dad received technical assistance to put in a watering trough but never lived to see it installed. That seed, first planted in the 1980s, took root as Hill recognized the benefits of protecting natural resources on the farm.

He began working with NRCS in 2011, focusing first on the home farm where his father was born and his grandfather had been a tenant farmer. At the time, he was using an open pasture grazing system where the cattle had access to about 90 acres throughout the year, and were drinking directly from the streams on the property.

The fields were primarily fescue and underutilized in the open system. Though he'd tried growing hay for winter feed, J.D. found that he could purchase it more economically from other producers.
"With rotational grazing, you don’t have to build fences or hunt for the cattle. It also reduces stress on the animals, making it safer and easier to move them." - J.D. Hill, landowner

Building a Support Network

Galax District Conservationist Jeb Minarik helped J.D. plug into a Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) project designed to help farmers in 11 Southwestern Virginia counties increase income off pasture land and improve production by implementing and maintaining comprehensive grazing management systems.

Headed by the New River-Highlands Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Council, the three-year grant project brought grazing experts directly to farms to work with producers, and included a grazing school for ongoing support.

Graduating with Honors

In that time, J.D. has begun to transform his land by installing approximately 13 acres of exclusion fencing and planting trees to benefit water quality and support wildlife habitat. He has also transitioned to a more efficient grazing management system with 27 paddocks, watering troughs, stream crossings, and exclusion/cross fencing.

Hill recognizes the role of healthy soil in improving forage quality and quantity, and is paying more attention to soil testing and fertilizer applications these days. He knows that proper nutrient levels are critical to better forage production and reduced dependence on hay for winter feeding. In fact, J.D. hopes to one day stop baling hay and owning/maintaining hay equipment altogether.

Passing the Torch

Looking ahead, Hill hopes that his sustainable system will be a blueprint for future generations to follow. He willingly shares what he’s learned with others and has opened his farm for son-in-law Aaron Horton to use as an outdoor classroom.

Galax Agricultural/Forestry students have walked J.D.’s pasture and forestland; seen rotational grazing and riparian buffers in action; and are currently raising trout to be released in a stream on the property. These experiences have given them a better understanding of natural resource protection and made them part of the oral tradition that sustains Virginia farming.

Above: Hill installed more than a mile of pipeline along with watering troughs, stream crossings, and exclusion/cross fencing for his grazing system (photos by Jeb Minarik).

Below: A Galax student sees rotational grazing in action while his teacher, Aaron Horton, supervises.