



TEXAS

PROFILES IN soil health



Jonathan Cobb
Rogers, Texas
450 acres
Operation: Multi-species cover
crops with multi-species live-
stock grazing systems



‘Trapped’ in a soil health workshop, Texas producer changes his mind about leaving the farm

Jonathan Cobb had made up his mind. He was leaving the farm.

“I was disillusioned with farming in general because we were just pushing long days and chasing acres and it didn’t seem like there was very much reward,” Cobb says. “That quality of life was not very good. My wife was having to work a lot of hours full time and really support the family and 2,500 acres really



The Cobb’s have downsized their farm from 2500 acres to 450 and transitioned from row crops to cover crops, like those seen here, with multi-species livestock grazing systems.

didn’t support two families, and we weren’t living extravagant lifestyles by any means.”

Then came the drought of 2011.

“I thought, ‘Maybe this is a sign from God – maybe we shouldn’t be farming and maybe we should move on to something else,’” Cobb said.

In time, he and his wife Kaylyn put their house



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on the market and prepared to move to Austin, abandoning a century-old tradition of Cobb family farming.

Shortly after making that painful decision, Cobb's father asked him to stop by and review some soil test results that had just arrived at USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service's office in Temple. But before he could complete the chore, Cobb found himself "trapped" in a soil health workshop featuring NRCS' Ray Archuleta and Willie Durham.

"I thought, 'Oh great. I'm stuck in a meeting about more things that don't work,'" he says. "I had become jaded to a lot of presentations about the latest greatest new chemical or seed or whatever it was supposed to be – drought proof or increase your yield by at least three bushels – or whatever. I didn't really want to hear it."

Too polite to leave, he took a seat on the front row. Within minutes, Cobb was entranced by what he was hearing from the presenters and what he was seeing with his own eyes.

Unfortunately, the serendipitous encounter was both a blessing and curse for the 38-year-old Cobb.

"By lunch I was wrestling with 'I don't want to hear this because this is calling me to stay,'" he said.

What he heard that morning from the soil health presenters rekindled a passion and love that conventional agriculture had nearly extinguished.

"By the end of the day I knew I was going to stay and be a part of the paradigm shift," Cobb said. "It was that impactful. So I slept on that for a couple days and I talked with Kaylyn and we prayed about it."

Shortly thereafter, he told his father that he and his wife changed their minds. They wanted to stay.

"I came to dad and I said 'I think we are going to stay now because this stuff is exciting. I want to stay but I don't want to stay to do what we have been doing.'"

Since that fateful day, the Cobb's have downsized

Natural Resources Conservation Service



Integrating diverse species and animal grazing (including free range chickens) is at the heart of the Cobb farming operation.



Jonathan Cobb says that with a new focus on soil health, "we got rid of all of the tillage equipment, and just dove in" with cover crops.

their farm from 2500 acres to 450 and transitioned from row crops to cover crops with multi-species livestock grazing systems.

"We planted over a thousand acres of cover crops the very next year, got rid of all of the tillage equipment, and just dove in," he says.

Cobb admits his farming operation is still evolving, but improving soil health remains the central goal.

"One very high priority is to help with the soil and building up the soil and the carbon in the soil," he says. "We will probably make thousands of mistakes but we'll learn along the way."

Whatever happens, he says, "The goal is to build the soil."



Thanks to a focus on soil health, Jonathan Cobb and his family see a renewed hope on the farm.



Using diverse cover crops and diverse animal grazing, the Cobbs are building soil health on their farm.

While soil health is the foundation on the farm, integrating diverse species and animal grazing is the focus of the business. "All of the operations that we will make money from will be along those lines – diversifying the grass fed beef, pastured pork and sheep," Cobb says.

Cobb says this holistic approach to farming has required a leap of faith. "I think you have got to be that committed or you will try it and then those first failures will come along you will run back to what is familiar and so you got to be committed," he says.

"It gets scary when you are trying to move product and produce products [for the consumer market]," he says, "but it will come. It's an exciting future to look forward to, which it wasn't before at all."

By the end of the day I knew I was going to stay and be a part of the paradigm shift.

- Jonathan Cobb, landowner

Cobb says it also helps to have a solid support group. "I couldn't have done it without mentors," he says. "There's a growing network of people, great people that I've met all around the world, who instead of being competitive are completely gung-ho and supportive."

Part of his renewed excitement and passion also comes from the mysteries in the soil itself.

"DaVinci said 'We know far more about celestial bodies than we do the soil under our feet,' and that is still true today which is amazing," Cobb says. "We are approaching 2020 and we are just now discovering that we know very little about the inner relationships of the soil, the complexities of it. I don't think we will ever find out, which I like. I think that's cool."

While Cobb's new business model hasn't fully evolved, he and his family are already reaping some of the intrinsic rewards he fondly remembered as a child growing up on the farm – like enjoying the smell of blooming clover in the evening and watching the sun rise on a warm summer day.

"If we can make a living and stay here then we couldn't ask for anything more," he says.

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