Innovative Grazier Transforms Soil for Better Forage.

With the price of grain and fertilizer, Craig County grazier J.C. Winstead says good forage management has never been more important to cattlemen than it is today.

He recognizes that healthy soil is better equipped to supply nutrients and moisture to forages, which factors directly into his bottom line at the end of the year.

"Good nutrition is the number one requirement for cattle health and production," says Winstead. "My only feed is forage and forage production depends on soil health."

"My goal is to grow as much forage as possible and have it grazed while it is vegetative. Growing straw doesn't help produce pounds of beef."

The Benefits of a Blank Canvas

Winstead's 200-acre mountain farm had been neglected for 50 years before he bought it 32 years ago. Over the years, he has worked tirelessly to clear brush and trees, build fencing, and bury tons of rock to reclaim 90 open acres for grazing and forage production.

J.C. learned the fundamentals of grazing management by attending Virginia Forage and Grassland Council winter conferences and a VFGC grazing school. After reading as much as he could on the topic, Winstead personally designed and implemented his own grazing system without any government financial assistance.

The system consists of 22 permanent paddocks on the 45 acres of mountain side slope and another 45 acres of meadow land cut for hay once in the spring then grazed the rest of the year using temporary electric fencing. J.C. captures water from a strong
profiles in soil health

mountain spring which supplies 12 tire water troughs as it cascades down the pasture landscape.

Reclaiming the Land and Soil

When he first began clearing the pastures, J.C. fed hay on the disturbed areas to bring in nutrients and valuable organic matter and to remove encroaching brush and trees. Later, he participated in a nutrient transfer program transporting poultry litter from the Shenandoah Valley to his farm.

By building soil fertility and practicing good grazing management, he now has a diverse forage base consisting of orchardgrass, ryegrass, bluegrass, red and white clover, chicory, alfalfa and other forbs readily grazed by his cattle.

"I can see an increase in my forage base every year, which shows intensive grazing is working," says Winstead. "The carrying capacity has also increased by some 50 percent."

Stockpiling for Soil Health

J.C. says stockpiling is the most under-utilized grazing practice in Virginia. He strives to maximize grazing days in the winter by stockpiling as much forage as he can in the fall and then strip-grazing it daily over the winter to maximize forage utilization.

"I would much rather move a temporary fence in the winter while cattle are grazing than start a tractor," says Winstead. "If deer can graze through snow, so can the cattle."

With stockpiling, Winstead has cut his feeding days in half with his cattle grazing till the end of January. Then, cattle feed until spring on an early cut of hay. He says this system is not only great in the winter but gets him out of the hayfield in summer and allows summer grazing of the meadows.

J.C. grazes his pastures early in the spring to keep them vegetative. This spring over-grazing opens the canopy up for legumes and increases them in the stand. By the end of May, the pastures are grazed down and cattle moved to 10 acres of uncut meadow to allow time for regrowth.

After using this practice for several years, J.C. thinks stockpiling and strip grazing are the single greatest improvements he has made on his farm.

"Every January, I have the forage tested and I can't make hay in May that ever tests as well as the stockpile," says Winstead.

Cycling Nutrients the Smart Way

J.C. is a meticulous manager, attentive to the needs of his livestock but, arguably, even more aware of the thickness and vigor of his pasture, and the amount of standing forage ahead of the grazing herd.

Cattle are moved every day on the farm to maximize nutrient distribution and the woods are fenced out to keep the nutrients in the pasture. These intentional management practices have increased nutrient cycling and greatly reduced fertilizer needs over the years.

"Moving cattle daily is not a big chore as they are ready to move every time they see me," says Winstead. "It only takes a few minutes and this eagerness to move is a bonus when you need to get them up for working."
"Cattle are only exposed to the amount of forage they will consume that day. This prevents trampling and wastage and the utilization is very high."

"The grazed area often looks as if it had been machine-cut, and this tight grazing returns the nutrients right back to the soil."

**Working With a Plan**

Winstead says he prefers to be proactive rather than reactive in farm planning, mapping out his yearly and seasonal activities based on past experience and forage growth observations.

Every year and season is different than the one before, so he is constantly thinking ahead and making adjustments. In fact, he says his most effective work is done with a pencil and paper.

J.C.'s operation is living proof that, with a good plan and a commitment to improved grazing management, the infrastructure for a forage-livestock system can be installed on a modest budget with sustainable long-term results.

"Intensive grazing is only limited by my imagination," says J.C. "I enjoy trying different things and evaluating the results. I have learned in which season particular tasks and jobs are best done. There is a time for everything."

Winstead takes rotational grazing to the next level with ultra-high density stocking.

J.C. Winstead is a featured grazier on Virginia's **Gaining Ground: Successful Graziers Tell Their Stories** video produced in cooperation with The Downstream Project and five other conservation partners.

J.C. has hosted field days on his farm so other graziers can see his rotational grazing system in person and learn more about his experiences.

To learn more about J.C.'s conservation activities, visit [www.gaininggroundvirginia.org/](http://www.gaininggroundvirginia.org/).

Want to unlock the secrets in YOUR soil?  
Go to: [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov)