Kehn Sees Healthy Soil as Step Toward Efficiency

Chad Kehn, a fourth generation rancher, and his wife Cindy operate a diversified ranch in south central South Dakota near Bonesteel. With cattle the primary focus, his farming choices support livestock development.

Recently, land rents in south central South Dakota have doubled and tripled, so taking care of what he has is crucial for Kehn. “We’ve reached a point where increasing our efficiency makes more sense than increasing our number of acres,” Kehn said. “I want our operation to be around for my children and grandchildren. So taking the best possible care of our land is really important.”

For the Kehn family, maximizing efficiency meant tweaking the way they manage both their cow herd and farming acres. Kehn is three years into a five-year commitment with cover crops thanks to the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).
“Before CSP, I read a lot about cover crops but didn’t know where to start,” Kehn said. In 2011, Kehn realized that local staff NRCS was there to help says “Brandon Walter has been a great partner in the process.”

Kehn continued, “We’re only in our third year of cover crops, so I still have a lot to learn. But, I’m very impressed. I’m really looking forward to the value we’ll see when the weather cooperates.”

In Kehn’s first program year, his gained a basis for what to expect. Year two was plagued by severe drought and resulted in virtually no grass or cover crop production. This year’s rains were as much a blessing as they have been a delay. Kehn’s grasses performed well, and he was able to increase his carrying rate in a few pastures. On the other hand, getting his cover crops in the ground due to the delayed harvest was a challenge.

“In 2012, all our crops were zeroed out, except the field where we had used a cover crop mix; that field yielded 70 bushels,” Kehn recalled. “Did the cover crop make that much of a difference in a year? I don’t know, but it seems a close enough relationship to me that I’m going to keep up with.”

A cover crop mix, which includes crops like Sudan, turnips, radishes, oats, rape and millet, was designed to complement the cattle operation. This blend helps round out Kehn’s traditional crop plan, which centers on corn, seed oats and hay.

To increase efficiency, Kehn also added a hoop barn confinement system to his operation’s model. Built in 2011, the structure is 36-feet wide by 120-feet long and has a maximum capacity of 120 head. Kehn believes the barn has added so much value to his operation through increased feed efficiency, decreased animal stress and increased manure quality that he plans to add a second building.

Kehn puts calves in the hoop at about 750 pounds. Each week, he scrapes the cement apron and beds the area with corn stalks.

“The calves just explode when they go inside,” Kehn said. “A year ago, feedlots were talking about cattle reducing their feed intake from the heat. Mine didn’t have that problem.”

Kehn utilizes the manure as a by-product on all his fields. To increase soil health while complementing livestock needs, Kehn added cover crops. The cover crops have helped improve his soil’s organic matter

While providing additional grazing opportunities for his cattle. The hoop barn has maximized feed efficiency and given Kehn the ability to finish his own cattle while also improving the quality of manure he spreads across his fields.

In only three years, these combined efforts have noticeably improved crop yields. “There’s work involved to use CSP, but it’s all been worth it,” Kehn said. “I think you have to have an open mind for what’s out there. For me, the practices encouraged through NRCS are working. I’ve increased carrying rates in pastures, seen yield improvements and increased my profit margin. Diversifying has been the best thing for us.”

Background

Chad and Cindy Kehn are the fourth generation to own and operate their family land. Kehn earned an ag business degree from Mitchell Vo-Tech and believes strongly in the value of hands-on education. He runs about 500 pairs and plans to expand the cow herd by another 140 in 2014. Additionally, he farms corn, oats and a variety of cover crops on roughly 4,000 acres.

The couple has two children and three grandchildren.

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