

HAPPY COWS, HAPPY SOIL, HAPPY FARMER & RANCHER

New soil health practices, mob grazing benefit all, spurs pasture exchange

One farmer's efforts to build his soil health through no-till and direct seeding greatly benefitted him AND a cattle rancher burned out in last summer's fires in the Owyhees. Their success encouraged the Idaho Cattle Association, Idaho Dept. of Agriculture, and NRCS to put together a program to connect ranchers with more willing no-till farmers. Well done, folks. That's Conservation the Idaho Way! -Editor

By Steve Stuebner

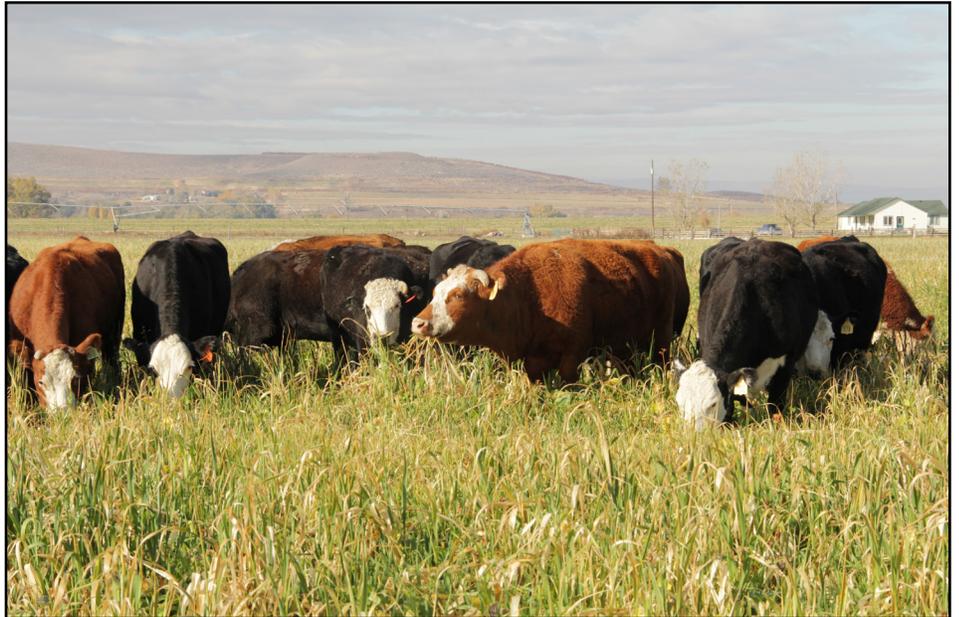
Canyon County hay farmer Brad McIntyre had been dipping his toe into no-till, direct-seed farming for several years to add nutrients to the soil, improve water infiltration, spend less time plowing fields and save money from less fuel inputs.

"Initially, I was trying to find a way to cut costs," McIntyre says. "But as I learned more about it, I've doing it because I want healthy soil as well."

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been championing a Soil Health Initiative nationwide and in Idaho to promote the concept of "giving back" to the soil, and fostering the growth of earthworms and micro-organisms that improve the soil's ability to absorb water and nutrients and funnel them into the roots of plants.

McIntyre went to a regional conference on healthy soil and got the religion. Marlon Winger, NRCS agronomist in Idaho, also has been working with him on the initiative. "I've been getting more and more passionate about it," McIntyre says.

But there's more to this story than just soil health. Part of no-till farming can involve planting cover crops on fields after harvest to add more nutrients into the soil. McIntyre came up with his own unique blend of cover crops, including radishes, turnips, sudangrass, millet, buckwheat, oats, soybeans, rape seed and wheat, and he planted them on about 225 acres.



Cattle graze on Brad McIntyre's property.

After several weeks of growing, the cover crops can be grazed by livestock to add manure or natural fertilizer to the fields, adding more nutrients to the soil. McIntyre was looking for a livestock operator to graze his cover crops last fall, and he met Owyhee County rancher Sam McKenzie at his church. Turns out that McKenzie had been burned out of a big part of a federal grazing allotment because of a 40,000-acre wildfire near the Owyhee River. The Bureau of Land Management typically does not allow livestock grazing for two years after a wildfire to give the rangeland time to recover.

McKenzie needed to quickly find a place to graze his cattle. Hay prices were too expensive to provide feed as the only alternative. McIntyre agreed to rent his cover crops to 300 cattle. "We were really grateful to the McIntyre family for helping us out with some pasture," McKenzie said.

After managed grazing by McKenzie's cattle, the pasture was so rich with nutrients

that the cattle put on about 3-4 pounds a day. "That's very unusual," McKenzie says.

"It's key to get that urine and manure well distributed throughout the field," Winger said. "It primes the biological system in the soil."

McIntyre used an intensive grazing technique that he calls "mob grazing" to concentrate the cattle in a small field with solar electric fencing. The technique allows the cattle to consume large amounts of grass in a short amount of time, it concentrates the manure in a small amount of space, adding to nutrients in the soil, and then the cattle are moved on to the next field.

CANYON COUNTY FARMER *Cont. from Pg. 1*

At the McIntyre farm, Winger said they dug up a one-square-foot piece of soil that lay underneath a cow pie.

“We counted 165 earth worms in that one square foot of soil,” he said. “If we found that many earth worms, think of all of the microbes in the soil that were multiplying at the same time.”

McIntyre moved McKenzie’s cows through the cover crops for about 45 days. When they cattle moved out of the fields, they were fat and happy, he said. “The McIntyre’s did a great job handling the cattle,” McKenzie said. “It was a big help to be able to graze that land, and we’re planning on using it again this year.”

McKenzie said more ranchers in Eastern Oregon were burned out by a fire in the Juntura area this summer, so there will be a need for more pasture on private ground, which is typically in high demand and hard to find. The Juntura-area fire burned more than 300,000 acres.

Last summer, the Pony and Elk complex fires in the Mountain Home area burned almost 300,000 acres on BLM land and in the Boise National Forest, burning up cattle and wildlife, and forcing numerous ranchers to find pasture elsewhere. The federal agencies are resting the burned-over lands for two years, and neither the Forest Service nor the BLM have much surplus pasture available for ranchers whose grazing allotments have been burned by wildfires.

Sensing the need for cattle pasture, John Biar, a livestock specialist for the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, and Eugene Schock, assistant state conservationists for NRCS in Boise, worked together with the Idaho Cattle Association to create a new web portal where ranchers can request private pasture. It’s called the Cover Crop Pasture Exchange. Farmers and ranchers can register to share information

on the pasture exchange by going to the Idaho Cattle Association main web site, <http://www.idahocattle.org/>.

The web site is not getting very much use, yet, says Jared Brackett, a Three Creek rancher and board president of ICA, but he expects it to catch on.

“There’s a lot of information exchanged about this sort of thing in local coffee shops, and a lot of the producers don’t use the Internet that much. But we wanted to provide a way for people to sign up because if you get burned out of your federal grazing allotments, it can be really hard to find a place to graze your livestock,” Brackett said. “It’s always nice when people can come together like they did in Brad McIntyre’s situation.”

Renting cover crop pastures also helps pay for the cost of planting the cover crops, McIntyre said, adding, “It covered our costs.”

He expects to continue expanding no-till, direct-seed farming on his farm. “We’re continuing to experiment with it,” he said.

He’s invested in his own direct-seed planting drilling equipment, and the Ada and Canyon county soil conservation districts have purchased one as well to share with producers who want to try it out.

Linda Phillips, outreach coordinator for the Canyon Soil Conservation District, said soil health is one of the “cornerstones” of soil and water conservation work. The no-till, direct-seed farming approach is slowly catching on in the valley, she said, depending on what kind of crops farmers are raising. Her district is working on educating farmers about the benefits. No-till farming has water quality benefits because it im-



Cover crops growing on Brad McIntyre’s property.

proves water-infiltration in the soil. McIntyre uses mostly pivots to water his crops, adding to water efficiency and higher water quality.

“We really appreciate that Brad is willing to share his innovative practices with cover crops and grazing,” Phillips said. “It’s great to see these new practices installed and show other farmers how they are working.”

When the soil is no longer tilled, it builds up organic matter over time. Cover crops help accelerate the process. “When you have more organic matter in the soil, it can hold up to four times as much water,” Phillips said. “And you don’t have sediment pouring off the field, which eventually can end up in the Boise River. We’re all aware of the need to improve water quality in the Boise River.”

“It’s been awesome to see a progressive farmer move ahead with the Soil Health Initiative,” adds Winger, who is promoting the program statewide. “Brad understands how soil health improves your farm and improves water quality.” □

For more info on Idaho Cattle Association’s Cover Crop Pasture Exchange, go to:

<http://idahocattle.org/grazingshare.aspx>

IT TOOK A COMMUNITY: CONSERVATION PARTNERS' GOODING GARDEN

Since the Gooding Community Garden's establishment in 2010, the Gooding Soil Conservation District has been involved with its maintenance, growth, and promotion. More recently, the Gooding SCD purchased a High Tunnel for the garden, and funded training and certification of 3 active gardeners in the community through the University of Idaho's Master Gardener program. The garden grows food AND hosts field days, soil health workshops, demo plots for cover crops, and educational classes.

The garden has truly been a collaborative effort- and is a testament to a community's commitment to each other and to voluntary conservation. -Editor

By Michelle Pak, USDA

Eric Moore, Soil Conservationist in Gooding, had a vision to grow a garden outside his office window. The Service Center sits on a large property. The front portion of the property contains the USDA offices but the back portion was vacant and covered with weeds; looking out of his window to a weed patch always bothered him. Eric approached the property owner for permission to put in a community garden and the landlord said yes as long as he could get liability coverage.

Eric went to the community to ask for help. The City provided water. Glanbia, a local cheese manufacturer, provided



The Gooding Community Garden occupies a once-empty lot behind the USDA Service Center.

funds. Boy Scouts built wheel-chair accessible raised beds and local farmers plowed the fields and helped install irrigation. The University of Idaho donated a shed. Eric was amazed with the amount of community support this project received. "As soon as people heard about the community garden, they came out of the woodwork to be involved and help out," he said.

lies had access to free garden plots to feed their families.

The garden has provided benefits beyond food. The Gooding Community Garden is a place where artists, children with disabilities, seniors, multi-generational families, farmers, University researchers, Future Farmers of America, Boy Scouts and USDA employees gather and work together to serve their community. Corn crops grown at the garden were sold at the Farmer's Market by the Future Farmers of America club and the profits were used to send students to a national competition in Indiana. Produce from the Gooding Community Garden also took bragging rights in the County Fair for blue ribbon eggplants, beans, and jalapenos.

Community ties are being strengthened in the garden. Eric describes some of the scenes he has witnessed out of his office window as a result of the garden:

- A three generation family (grandma, mom and daughter) all gardening together



The community garden's new high tunnel, donated by the Gooding Soil Conservation District.

The project started with a vision of a garden that could grow food for homebound seniors, local soup kitchens, and food pantries. That vision was realized; in one year of operation the garden provided 6,000 pounds of food for the needy. In addition, 17 fami-

Cont. on Pg. 4

GOODING COMMUNITY GARDEN *Cont. from Pg. 3*

- An older gentleman with a plot taking on the role as garden advisor to other gardeners and passing on his knowledge
- A disabled child in a wheelchair learning to garden in the accessible beds and taking joy in flinging dirt into the air.

Plans for the future include adding a teepee, iron sculptural works, handcrafted tiles from a local ceramic artist, and an outdoor Mexican bread oven. They also plan to expand into the "Gooding Community Garden Annex", a property located

adjacent to the elementary school which now contains dilapidated green houses. While the greenhouses need work, the greenhouse frames and utilities are intact. Once the greenhouses are repaired, Eric envisions a place where garden starts, cold-season produce for the school, and pollinator species can be grown.

The Gooding Soil and Conservation District plans to grow native plants for use on conservation and habitat restoration projects.

Eric is quick to point out that while he had the idea for the garden, the whole community made it happen. "The Community

was ready for a garden like this, it was just the right idea at the right time." he said. While it is undeniable that the community support has been generous and inspiring, it is also undeniable that Eric's enthusiasm about this project is contagious. His imagination and openness to all ideas have made it easy for people to join his efforts and find a place within in the garden to make their own projects happen. The back side of the garden's sign says it all - grow on! □

COMMISSION NEWS

DISTRICT ALLOCATIONS & SURVEYS

A report on technical assistance provided to districts in FY 2014 was presented and will be distributed to districts. District survey results were also presented. A copy of that report is available upon request.

DISTRICT ALLOCATIONS

District match allocations will be reviewed by the District Allocation Work Group (DAWG) in the next few weeks and their recommendation will be considered by the Board at a Special Teleconference Meeting on September 12th. Hold backs are not anticipated this year and checks should be received by districts by the end of September.

AG POLLUTION ABATEMENT PLAN UPDATE

Commissioners heard a presentation on the update of the Agricultural Pollution Abatement Plan. Over the fiscal year, Shelly Gilmore of Resource Planning Unlimited will be working with an advisory group to update

this state guidance document for the voluntary control of agricultural nonpoint source water quality pollution. Art Beal has been appointed to represent IASCD and will coordinate district input on the update.

BOARD ACTIONS

The following items were approved by the Commission:

FY 2016 BUDGET REQUEST

The Commission's FY 2016 budget request, due on September 1st, is essentially the same budget request as last year (adjusted for the removal of one-time expenses and benefit increases) with three new additions:

- As requested by IASCD, an additional \$50,000 in Trustee and Benefit Funds for districts (to be equally distributed)
- Replacement of field equipment - \$46,000

- Converting two existing part-time temporary administrative positions (state TMDL Lead and Administrative Assistant II) into one full-time permanent position. *(This request is administrative and does not include additional personnel funding.)*

FY 2014 PERFORMANCE MEASURES REPORT

The report's findings demonstrate a positive trend for voluntary conservation work through the Commission's efforts, and the efforts of their partners. It is posted on the Commission website at www.swc.idaho.gov.

RCRDP INTEREST RATES

RCRDP Interest Rates for FY 2015 remain the same as last fiscal year: 2.5% for a 1- to 7-year term, 3% for an 8- to 12-year term, and 3.5% for a 13- to 15-year term. There is a single loan limit of \$200,000 and \$300,000 maximum for any individual borrower. □

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Conservation the Idaho Way: Sowing Seeds of Stewardship