



Grass Farming and Ranching

This issue of ATTRAnews looks at a style of livestock production driven on the farmer's side by a quest for sustainable, low-cost production methods. On the consumer's side, the market for grass-fed meat is surging, based on new nutritional information about its healthful qualities.



Beef cattle on the McAlpine Ranch.
Below right: Clay McAlpine, Karalee Bancroft, and friends recently hosted a pig roast on the Ranch.

Continuous grazing is no longer the only way to manage pasturelands. Innovative controlled grazing plans are now becoming popular, providing an opportunity to increase profits.

In a system of controlled rotations, pastures are subdivided into paddocks. Animals are moved to fresh paddocks frequently to provide time for pasture re-growth. Pasture-based production requires the producer to develop skill in decision-making and monitoring the results of decisions. Because these systems require more animal handling and more applied knowledge of forage plants and pasture-animal interactions, they are often referred to as management-intensive grazing. (From ATTRA's *Rotational Grazing and Sustainable Pasture Management* by Alice Beetz.)

Homestead Healthy Foods, Texas

Ten years ago, when Richard and Peggy Sechrist married, they thought carefully about what they wanted for their family and for their south-central Texas ranch. The 1,100-acre dryland spread had been grazed conventionally since the 1940s. The grass was sparse, the streambeds trampled and eroded.

The couple began to practice management-intensive grazing, using the principles of Holistic Resource Management. "We decided to build a business based on our values," Peggy said. "For us, that meant a meat product that was healthy for consumers, and a production method that enhanced our ecological system." In 1995, theirs was the first ranch in Texas to be certified organic.

Under the non-irrigated, intensive grazing scheme, the land has improved, with denser and more varied grasses and plants. The animals are healthy. In fact, Peggy says, "Organic livestock production became the easiest part of this experience. The real challenge – one we underestimated – is marketing," which is "very time-consuming."

(see *Homestead Healthy Foods* on page 3)

McAlpine Ranch, Montana

Clay McAlpine's family has been ranching in Montana for fifty years, and he knows it's hard to change. He started to farm on his own in the 1980s, "when it was rotten," as he put it. "The toughest thing for chemically dependent farmers and ranchers is making a transition. I couldn't have made it without long-term goals. It's very important to visualize where you want to be."

Now the Valier, Montana, ranch is certified organic, with hogs and grass-fed Angus cattle on 40 separate dryland pastures. McAlpine has been steadily reducing the amount of beans and grains he produces on the place. "With both livestock and crops, you never have any slack time," he said. "Just managing grazing animals is plenty."

Marketing partner Karalee Bancroft, of Caroline Ranch Co., has been able to sell all the meat McAlpine can produce. "This is our eighth year of drought, and we're going totally on cash flow," McAlpine said. "The markets are going to drive the system. If this demand for healthy food has hit Montana, it's going everywhere."

McAlpine Ranch beef and pork is available through Caroline Ranch Co., P.O. Box 632, Boulder, MT 59632, 406/225-4280.



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New Work on Sheep and Goat Production

by Tracy Mumma, NCAT Program Specialist

Today there is heightened interest in goats and sheep for dairy products, meat, and control of brush and weeds. Three new publications from ATTRA provide a wealth of information.

For more than two years, NCAT staff have been working on a project to enhance agricultural educators' awareness of sheep and goat production — particularly sustainable production. Funded by the Southern Region SARE Professional Development Program, this project developed a *Small Ruminant Sustainability Checklist* and a listserv for sheep and goat producers and educators (to subscribe, e-mail Linda Coffey, lindac@ncat.org). Staff have organized train-the-trainer workshops on sheep and goat production in Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, and North Carolina, and they have assembled resources for a manual on sheep and goat production.

NCAT recruited producers to help develop and field-test the *Small Ruminant Sustainability Checklist*. Like the checklists for beef and dairy farms, the new checklist is designed to stimulate critical thinking. It will help sheep and goat producers identify strengths and areas for potential improvement. The checklist leads the producer through a farm evaluation, discussion of whole-farm planning, and details of forage and livestock management. It provides an extensive list of resources in print and on-line.



ATTRA is also releasing two related publications — the updated *Goats: Sustainable Production Overview* and a brand-new publication, *Dairy Goats: Sustainable Production*. Other sheep and goat publications available from ATTRA are *Dairy Sheep; Sustainable Sheep Production*; and *Sustainable Goat Production: Meat Goats*.

Forage Resources

American Forage and Grassland Council, P.O. Box 94, Georgetown, Texas 78627, 800/944-2342, e-mail: dtucker@io.com, www.afgc.org

Great Lakes Grazing Network. Contact: Mary Anderson, 19225 Dewey, Whitehall, WI 54773, 715/538-4396 ext. 33, mary.anderson@wi.usda.gov, www.glgm.org

Stockman Grass Farmer magazine, P.O. Box 2300, Ridgeland, MS 39158-9911, 800/748-9808, www.stockmangrassfarmer.com

California Grazing Academy. Contact: Roger Ingram, UC Co-op Extension Livestock and Natural Resources Farm Advisor, DeWitt Center, 11477 E Avenue, Auburn, CA 95603, rsingram@ucdavis.edu, 530/889-7385

American Grassfed Association, P.O. Box 400, Kiowa, CO 80117, 877/774-7277, www.americangrassfed.org

US GrassFed Society, 1270 County Road 256, Fort Payne, AL 35967, 256/845-3009, Web site: <http://usgrassfed.com>

The Weston A. Price Foundation, 4200 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20016, 202/333-HEAL, www.westonaprice.org/farming/splendor.html

Quivira Coalition promotes common-sense rangeland management. 1413 2nd Street, Ste. 1, Santa Fe, NM 87505, 505/820-2544, www.quiviracoalition.org

The Eat Wild Web site (www.eatwild.com) lists farmers and ranchers who raise livestock on pasture and sell directly to consumers.

ATTRA Grass Farming Publications

These publications can be downloaded from the ATTRA Web site, www.attra.ncat.org, or call 800/346-9140 for a free copy. ATTRA's Web site also offers numerous links to important resources for new and experienced grass farmers: <http://attra.ncat.org/livestock.html#Grass>

Grass Farming

Sustainable Pasture Management
A Brief Overview of Nutrient Cycling in Pastures
Nutrient Cycling in Pastures
Assessing the Pasture Soil Resource
Converting Cropland to Perennial Grassland
Rotational Grazing
Matching Livestock and Forage Resources in Controlled Grazing
Multispecies Grazing
Meeting Nutritional Needs of Ruminants on Pasture
Grazing Networks for Livestock Producers
Protecting Riparian Areas: Farmland Management Strategies
Managed Grazing in Riparian Areas
Dung Beetle Benefits in the Pasture Ecosystem
Thistle Control Alternatives

Beef and Dairy

Sustainable Beef Production
Beef Farm Sustainability Checklist
Dairy Farm Sustainability Checklist
Dairy Sheep
Grass-Based and Seasonal Dairying
Economics of Grass-based Dairying
Raising Dairy Heifers on Pasture
Value-added Dairy Options
Alternative Meat Marketing
Alternative Beef Marketing
Freeze Protection for Solar-powered Livestock Watering Systems

Sheep and Goats

Sustainable Sheep Production
Dairy Sheep
Goats: Sustainable Production: Overview (recently updated)
Dairy Goats: Sustainable Production
Sustainable Goat Production: Meat Goats
Small Ruminant Sustainability Checklist
Small Ruminant Checklist
Quick Start
Small Ruminant Resource List

Pastured Poultry

Pastured Poultry: An HPI Case Study Booklet
Growing Your Range Poultry Business: An Entrepreneur's Toolbox
Range Poultry Housing

See Pasture-Based Dairies in Action

More and more dairies are being managed as pasture-based enterprises. Making the switch from conventional grain and hay operations is a difficult decision. Succeeding is even harder. There are a number of experiment stations where dairy farmers can go to see what it takes, and to ask for advice.

Five years ago, the Middle Tennessee Experiment Station switched over to pasture-based production. Superintendent Dennis Onks figures they have been saving a dollar a day per head ever since. "That sure made life easier when the budget cuts hit us," he said.

The dairy no longer has to make as much silage or cut as much hay, but there are still plenty of tricks to this trade. Grass-fed livestock systems require very attentive management.

Many dairy farmers in this part of the country — where 50% of the dairies have gone out of business in the past few years — are willing to pay attention.

"Graziers come out to see what we're doing and ask questions. But it's hard to get out of a rut," said Onks. "There's the fear factor: the transition period can be a disaster if you're not informed." That's where the experiment stations come in. Their mission is to try things out and take the risks, so the farmers don't have to.

"We're big promoters of grass-fed production," Onks said. "This is a tool that can keep dairies viable. Farmers save money on feed, plus they have more free time

— another money-saver." Contact: Middle Tennessee Experiment Station, Spring Hill, TN, 931/486-2129

University of Louisiana-Lafayette's dairy near St. Martinville



Dairy farmers can observe pasture-based operations — many of them seasonal dairies, where cows all freshen at about the same time in the spring and are dried off in the winter — at university experiment stations around the country, including these locations.

- North Carolina State University's Center for Environmental Farming Systems Dairy, 201 Stevens Mill Road, Goldsboro, NC 27530. Contact: Dr. Steve Washburn, 919/515-7726, e-mail: Steve_Washburn@ncsu.edu
- University of Missouri Southwest Center Dairy. Contact: Dr. Richard Crawford, 14548 Highway H, Mt. Vernon, MO 65712-9523, 417/466-2148, e-mail: crawfordr@missouri.edu. Web site: <http://aes.missouri.edu/swcenter/fieldday/overview.stm>
- University of Louisiana-Lafayette's dairy converted from total confinement in 1992. Located at the 600-acre Model Sustainable Agricultural Complex in Acadia's Atchafalaya Basin. Contact: Manager Mark J. Simon,

337/394-5978, e-mail: mjs0563@louisiana.edu

- The U.S. Dairy Forage Research Center coordinates research in three states. 1925 Linden Drive West, Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706, 608/264-5240, www.dfrc.ars.usda.gov

Pasture-Based & Organic Dairy Workshops

- In Northern California, contact: Annie Eicher, Organic Farming Program Coordinator, UC Co-op Extension, 5630 South Broadway, Eureka, CA 95503, 707/445-7351, aleicher@ucdavis.edu
- Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy Farmers, contact: CIAS, 1450 Linden Drive, Madison, WI 53706, 608/262-5200

Visit ATTRA's New and Improved Web Site www.attra.ncat.org

- Web pages now load faster — great for users with dial-up connections
- New high-powered search option on each page, to quickly find the information you need
- Extensive database and on-line input form for ATTRA's Sustainable Farming Internships & Apprenticeships listings
- Enhanced accessibility features such as a "text only" link on each page, and better access for the screen readers used by visually impaired individuals

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Homestead Healthy Foods

The Sechrists market their grass-fed beef and poultry under the label Homestead Healthy Foods. Their products are sold throughout the U.S. by several distributors as well as direct to consumers. Contact: Richard & Peggy Sechrist, 25 Thunderbird Road, Fredericksburg, TX 78624, 830/997-2508, www.homesteadhealthyfoods.com



Two Special NCAT-Sponsored Livestock Workshops

Putting It All Together: Using Livestock to Manage Natural Resources

November 2-4, Heifer International Ranch, Perryville, Arkansas

NCAT Agriculture Specialists Tim Johnson, George Kuepper, and Ann Wells have organized a training conference to enhance the skills of educators and farmer-trainers who teach others how to work with livestock to manage natural resources. This event will bring together many of the lessons from five previous SARE-funded NCAT projects.

The conference will give producers a chance to teach educators what they have learned on their own farms. Participants include Cooperative Extension agents, USDA-NRCS field personnel, land grant university staff, Heifer International field coordinators, and farmer-leaders. Sponsored by Southern SARE Professional Development Program, Heifer International, and NCAT. Scholarships are available for room, board, and the workshop fee. Contact: Ann Wells, 479/442-9824, ext. 121, annw@ncat.org

Organic Livestock Conference

Friday, October 29, 2004, 10 a.m. to noon, Pacific time

This satellite-broadcast national video conference is intended to help ag professionals (Extension, consultants, suppliers, veterinarians, etc.) become familiar with the organic livestock sector of agriculture. Produced by Washington State University in cooperation with NCAT, Western SARE, Oregon State University, and Oregon Tilth. Contact: David Granatstein, Sustainable Agriculture Specialist, Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources, WSU, 1100 Western Ave. N., Wenatchee, WA 98801, 509/663-8181, ext. 222, e-mail: granats@wsu.edu. Web site: <http://ext.wsu.edu/noas/>

New ATTRA Publications

- ◆ Agricultural Business Planning Templates & Resources
- ◆ Selling to Restaurants
- ◆ Thistle Control Alternatives
- ◆ Small Ruminant Sustainability Checksheet
- ◆ Small Ruminant Checksheet- Quick Start
- ◆ Small Ruminant Resources

Recently Updated ATTRA Publications

- ◆ Mushroom Cultivation & Marketing
- ◆ Sources of "Spraying Prohibited" Signs for Organic Farms
- ◆ Sustainable Management of Soil-Borne Plant Diseases
- ◆ Organic Marketing Resources
- ◆ Blueberries: Organic Production
- ◆ Goats: Sustainable Production Overview

In Our Next Issue

The November-December
ATTRAnews will feature
Organic Agriculture

ATTRAnews

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Karen Van Epen, Editor
Robyn Metzger, Production
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