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.

Continuous grazing is no longer the only way to manage pastur- e. 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 skills 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 Sechrest 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)

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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 Checksheet and a listserve 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 Checksheet. Like the checksheets for beef and dairy farms, the new checksheet is designed to stimulate critical thinking. It will help sheep and goat producers identify strengths and areas for potential improvement. The checksheet 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


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


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 Checksheet
Dairy Farm Sustainability Checksheet
Dairy Beef
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 Checksheet
Small Ruminant Checksheet
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
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.

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

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/

In Our Next Issue

ATTRAnews will feature Organic Agriculture

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

Organic Agriculture

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