



August 11, 2017

COVER CROP OPPORTUNITIES

Last week I hosted Mike Buis and his wife Joanne who is a cattle rancher and farmer near Chatham, Ontario. I convinced him to come to a new program held at the Lancaster Event Center to give a keynote presentation on how rotating crops, no-till farming and grazing cover crops can become new opportunities for farmers. A Sustainable Agriculture grant for travel and working with co-worker Gary Lesoing made it happen. Approximately 150 people attended the conference and trade show.

Mike is a third generation cattle rancher and his family raises cattle to supply their own farm retail store and several specialty markets with farm raised local beef. They sell about two beef a week through their retail store. Their cropland produces specialty crops of sweet corn, seed corn and seed beans as well as a number of commercial cash crops. Farm tours, demonstration sites and speaking engagements allow Mike to share his strategic use of cover crops following intensive field crop production that make cattle farming sustainable on premium valued farmland.

He has sources for cheap feed beyond his cover crops. While visiting two farms in Nemaha County, after he landed at Omaha Eppley Airfield, he took on and approved several free semi loads of potatoes and carrots. He is in vegetable country near Lake Erie and with a local carrot processor he has made arrangements to source food waste and can utilize it with the cow herd. The farm panel included a farmer east of Wilber who routinely has 220 cows with only 170 acres of perennial pasture. How can that happen? Opportunity grazing with cover crops, in particular cereal rye, and he plants “green” soon after grazing in the spring. I measured 4 percent organic matter in a soil sample in a nitrogen rate plot this year on a dryland field. That was impressive. Another farmer from Gresham has been no till farming for 30 years and sometimes uses shallow tillage if the cattle track up a sacrifice area of a field. He owns 250 head of cows and has networked with ranchers in Nebraska to provide them grazing opportunity in the winter on cover crops he managed. This last year, he and two partners managed 1,000 head of cattle for 120 days in the winter for additional income or \$1.00 a head per day. Two new winter jobs were created for young farmers and a neighbor started a new enterprise raising cereal ryegrass and harvesting it and double cropping soybeans, providing new income opportunity for the area.

A farmer near Lincoln shared how he is now allowing a neighbor to graze his no-till farmed row crops that have cover crop in them for one month and not to be overgrazed. He charged \$10 per acre. His goal is to increase organic matter in his fields.

Mary Drewnoski, Beef Systems Specialist at UNL, reported on the grazing research at 7 locations across Nebraska. The location at Mead has data since 1997 in an irrigated corn-soybean rotation. Spring grazing of irrigated corn stalks from February to mid-April has had no statistical difference in irrigated corn yield but a 1-2 bushel bump in soybean yields.

Jay Parsons, UNL Ag Economics, reported a new insurance program where annual cover crops can be insured to protect against drought and production risk when cattle producers have risk in the cost. He also talked about a brand new exchange that he set up called <http://cropresidueexchange.unl.edu> It is a free listing of crop residue available for potential new



grazing arrangements. On the other side of the equation, livestock producers can search for crop residue listings available for potential grazing arrangements. The goal is to increase the use of crop residue for livestock grazing by helping crop producers better make available their crop residue to cattle producers and develop mutually beneficial grazing agreements.

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