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Grazing a Productive Alternative to Conservation Reserve Program

Laura Paine, Columbia County Crops and Soils Agent; and Jerry Cigelske
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One of the appeals of management intensive grazing is its environmental benefits. In fact, these environmental benefits of MiG rival those of one of the biggest conservation programs offered by the federal government: CRP. Everyone's familiar with the Conservation Reserve Program–it takes row cropped ground out of production and puts it into perennial cover, usually grass mixtures.

Protecting our resources on both public and private land is important and CRP is one of many tools we can use to accomplish this goal. Idling land from production is certainly suitable for some sites and some farmers, but why not give farmers more options? CRP doesn't have to stand for Complete Reversal of Productivity! Grass is making a resurgence (and not just at Woodstock reunions), but does it have to be seeded and then just idled? When CRP was started, we were in the middle of the setaside programs and so the government just continued with the policy of paying farmers to not produce. Wouldn't it be better to put sensitive land to a suitable use and continue to earn a real income from it, rather than a subsidy?

As we all know, government policies are not always rational and we'd do well to consider a wider range of options, especially in the arena of farm policy. Agriculture is one of our nation's most productive economic sectors. Should we be encouraging farmers, or any other sector to be less productive?

Jerry's heard of an example at the opposite extreme in Japan, where they have a used car tax. The older a car gets the more they tax it to force people to buy a new car sooner! That's one way to ensure a market for your products! If they tried that here many of us could not drive most of our vehicles and tractors! To Jerry, 100,000 miles is just well broke in! So while Japan uses incentives to encourage production because it is good for their economy, we spend tax dollars to discourage production. Go figure!

Now we have the skills, equipment, technology, and the means to make this marginal land productive and still protect it. What is this break through? the government policy wonks ask. It is called a cow, combined with electric fencing! O.K. the cow is not new, but that is just the point. Why re-invent the wheel? Why not dispense with wheels altogether? The cow is perfectly designed to harvest these marginal fields. She has 4-foot drive for steep hills; she can see where she is eating to avoid stones (Jerry's hay mower never did that),and has automatic self-leveling to avoid rollovers!

Seriously, though, there are many reasons to consider managed grazing, not only as a productive use of highly erodible land, but as a conservation practice in some ways superior to CRP. Well managed pastures rival CRP for soil erosion control, as well as in reduction of pesticide and fertilizer inputs. Regular removal of grass top growth promotes healthy plants and soil, controls weeds, creates denser stands and can help keep legumes in the stand.

In some ways, CRP is an unnatural situation: there are very few natural grasslands that exist without grazing animals to recycle nutrients. The native prairies that once existed in North America were grazed in broad, landscape-scale rotations by bison and elk. The animals moved in response to fresh growth in spring or after fires, thus giving the prairies the rest-rotation cycle that we all know is critical to healthy grasslands.

Another goal of the Conservation Reserve Program is providing wildlife habitat, especially for grassland birds. These birds, like meadowlarks and bobolinks, have been declining in population since our intensive modern agriculture systems became prevalent in the 1950s. Grassland birds are the single most threatened group of animals in North America, with some species like the grasshopper sparrow declining at rates up to 10% per year. Providing perennial grassy cover within our agricultural landscapes is one of the ways we can help these critters. CRP does this, but so does managed grazing. How do they compare with each other and with rowcrops?

Grain fields have serious limitations as bird habitat. Many birds use rowcrop fields for feeding and foraging, but only three species actually nest in corn and soybean fields. Their nesting success in these highly disturbed habitats is very low. In contrast, most of the species observed in CRP fields and MiG pastures are actually nesting there. Many grass farmers have reported seeing an increase in meadowlarks and other grassland birds after they've seeded down crop fields to pasture.

Rotational grazing can provide habitat comparable to CRP. According to a recent review of research on CRP as grassland bird habitat (Journal of Production Agriculture, Vol. 11(1): 61-66), numbers of birds using CRP fields were 2 to 10 times higher than those using rowcrop fields. Research that Laura worked on with Dave Sample (Wisconsin DNR), Stan Temple (UW Wildlife Ecology), and Dan Undersander (UW Agronomy) showed that MiG pastures attracted bird populations similar to those observed in CRP fields and 65% more nesting pairs of birds than we found in continuously grazed pastures.

The big difference between pastures and CRP from a ground-nesting bird's perspective is disturbance. In the CRP studies that looked at nest survival, an average of 40% of the nests started in CRP fields were successful. That doesn't sound like much, but it's a tough world out there! Nesting success figures over 50% are rare even in ideal conditions.

In our research, we found that the rapid rotations required to keep up with grass growth in early summer had a significant impact on the birds whose nesting season is primarily in May and June. Nest survival in these paddocks was very low. However, we found that groups of paddocks within a pasture system that were set aside as refuges during the nesting season had higher numbers of nesting pairs and nest survival comparable to CRP fields. Together, the grazed paddocks and the refuges set aside for 6 weeks in May and June are likely to produce many more grassland bird nests than a conventional livestock farm growing row crops and alfalfa (I'll write more about managing pasture systems for grassland birds in a future article).

So, if one of our conservation goals is to provide adequate habitat for grassland birds and other wildlife that once thrived in Wisconsin, CRP fields and grass farms can both contribute. It is good to see that our federal government is not only funding the CRP, but is supporting well-managed pasture systems through NRCS programs like the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). In doing so we can conserve another dwindling natural resource--the American farmer!

Biography for Laura Paine,
University of Wisconsin Extension Crops and Soils Agent

I am an agronomist and a Crops and Soils Agent with the University of Wisconsin Extension Service, based in Columbia County. I have a broad plant science background with education and training in botany, horticulture, and agronomy. Before joining UW Extension a month and a half ago, I spent 6 years involved in forage and grazing research with the University of Wisconsin-Madison Agronomy Department. My work involved research station and on-farm research on grazing management including looking at resource conservation issues such as water quality, wildlife habitat, and using native prairie plants in pasture systems. My current efforts include working with the Columbia County Grazing Network and with regional grazing activities in Eastern Wisconsin, as well as serving the broader agricultural needs of Columbia County farmers.

Biography for Jerry Cigelske,
Columbia County grazier and network member

Jerry and Cathy Cigelske operate CJ Dairy Farm near Cambria WI with their three daughters, Aysha, Sierra, and Amber. John Sylla is the herdsman and Kristy Kreuger and Pat Sumner also work as milkers and equipment operator. The herd consists of 150 Holsteins, Jerseys and Jersteins (cross between the two) and all youngstock is raised for replacements or feeder steers.
They run 450 acres with one quarter permanent pastures, one quarter flexes between hay and pasture as needed and the balance is hay, corn and oats. Since switching to rotational grazing five years ago, the Cigelske's report that they are farming for the fun of it again, instead of farming just for a tax write-off!