

GrassWorks Retrospective: after 10 years, what now?

By Laura Paine

December 18, 2002

Back in September, I had the privilege of participating in a discussion about the future of GrassWorks, the farmer-led grazing organization that has been responsible for the annual Wisconsin Grazing Conference for nearly a decade.

Around the table was a group of farmers elected by their local network to represent them on the GrassWorks board of directors. I've always been impressed by this loosely-organized group and what it's accomplished with little or no assistance from the university, agencies, or ag businesses. The self-directed nature of GrassWorks has been one of its strengths. It has given grass farmers a sense of independence and empowerment.

On the other hand, it has also perhaps kept GrassWorks from organizing to a level which could accomplish a lot more for livestock farmers in Wisconsin. But if we want this uniquely farmer-driven organization to be here for grass farmers in the future, it might gain from having a little more structure. That's what we're struggling with now—balancing the tendency to shun the trappings of mainstream agricultural organizations with the need to provide continuity and stability over the long term. Where do we go from here?

When you're trying to figure out what you want your future to look like, it sometimes helps to first look back at where you've been. To do this, we got out a big piece of butcher paper and drew a time line on it. As each of us added events and people that we remembered, a picture of GrassWorks' role in the grazing in Wisconsin emerged.

The earliest of our current generation of graziers must have started grazing in the 1970s. This new wave of grazing interest was spurred by the introduction of New Zealand grazing concepts and equipment by folks like Bill Murphy (author of "Greener Pastures on Your Side of the Fence" and brother-in-law of Dan Patenaude). A lot of informal networking took place during the 1970s and 80s.

GrassWorks as an organization has its roots in the Southern Wisconsin Farmers' Research Network (SWFRN). This early farmer network was the inspiration of several farmers including Mike Canell, Dean Swenson, Carl Pulvermacher, and Steve Stevenson, who attended a Rodale-sponsored conference in LaCrosse in 1986. They were excited about the idea of doing their own on-farm research and figuring out for themselves a better way to farm.

SWFRN and a number of other farmer networks formed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Financial support came from a sustainable agriculture granting program sponsored by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP). These funds allowed the networks to cover the costs of mailings, advertising and staff. SWFRN hired Carl Fredericks as their part-time coordinator.

The very first Wisconsin Grazing Conference was organized by SWFRN and held in 1991 at the Don Q Inn in Dodgeville. One hundred fifty people came to hear Allan Nation, publisher of 'Stockman Grassfarmer.' The success of that event led Nation to organize a second grazing conference in 1992 in Wisconsin Dells. The title he gave it: 'The First Annual North American Dairy Grazing Conference' suggested that he had plans for more,

but the next year, Carl and SWFRN forged ahead and planned their own conference with support from a number of more local sources including 'Agri-View' newspaper and the Wisconsin Rural Development Center.

In 1994, SWFRN moved the conference to Stevens Point and voted to transform itself into a statewide organization. The name 'GrassWorks' was the brainchild of the late and greatly missed Mike Canell. Mike liked to point out that 'grass really does work' as a way of feeding livestock. And to him, the name captured the concept of networks of grass farmers.

Through most of the 1990s, conference planning was an informal process. Carl and now-retired LaFayette County Ag Agent John Cockrell relied heavily on SWFRN members for guidance on developing the program, but they also met with grazing networks across the state and made phone calls to key people to gather ideas.

Under Carl's direction, the Wisconsin Grazing Conference thrived. Carl worked throughout the year to line up speakers and organize sessions. He kept registration fees low and encouraged couples to attend and bring their families. He made things happen behind the scenes and allowed the conference to truly be a farmer-driven, farmer-run event.

And it met a need. During the first half of the 1990s, the Wisconsin Grazing Conference was one of only a few sources of information on grazing. It provided a space for graziers to gather and learn from each other. It was massively successful for the first several years. Attendance increased annually to a peak of over 700 people in 1997.

Those first conferences fed the spontaneous grassroots networking that was occurring across the state. From 1990 to 1996, 21 farmer networks were started across the state. Not all of them survived, but a number of grazing networks have evolved and flourished. These networks and other programs have provided a variety of new learning opportunities. In the late 1990s, attendance at the conference began to decline as the number of new graziers leveled off and both new and experienced graziers found other ways of learning.

This is not a unique time line. If you look at any new idea, you see a similar pattern. At first there's a rapid increase of 'early adopters,' people who like to experiment and push the envelope. Once those people have gotten things figured out, the more cautious among us look around, see how the others are doing with the new idea, and consider trying it too. That's a much slower process and adoption almost always levels off after awhile.

Grazing Conference attendance follows fairly closely the pattern of farmer adoption of managed grazing. There was a linear increase in both adoption and conference attendance in the early 1990s. Then around 1997, as the number of 'grazing converts' leveled off at about 15% of dairy farmers, conference attendance began to decline. In the last couple of years, grass farming adoption has begun to increase again (currently about 22% of dairy farmers) and conference attendance has followed.

While it's had its ups and downs, the Wisconsin Grazing Conference has always provided a valuable educational experience for those who attend. GrassWorks and all those who've been involved in it over the years can be proud of the contribution they've made to the grass farming community in the Upper Midwest.

Carl Fredericks' departure in 2000 gave the GrassWorks board a push to reflect on its purpose. For the first 7 years of its existence, GrassWork's sole 'raison d'etre' was to sponsor the conference. But its mission: 'To facilitate the exchange of information among grass farmers' can be achieved in many ways. The grazing movement is blessed with a lot of energetic, creative, committed people and a lot has been accomplished. Now, the question becomes, can we do more? And how do we need to organize ourselves to make it happen?

The structure of GrassWorks acknowledges the importance of local networks. Any network having 5 or more

members joining GrassWorks will have a seat on the board. Some of the funds and additional organizing help are returned to local networks. The membership fee encourages commitment to the organization by farmer members and accountability on the part of board members. It helps maintain the independence that has characterized the movement from the beginning. GrassWorks has the potential to accomplish a lot for grass farmers in Wisconsin, but it's only as strong as its members make it. I encourage you to join—I have!

For information on joining GrassWorks, contact Paul Nehring at 715-261-6000 or pmnehring@mail.co.marathon.wi.us. Or visit the following website: <http://www.uwrf.edu/grazing/#Links>

Thanks to Carl Fredericks, Joe Tomandl, Harley Troester, Lyle Guralski, Paul Nehring, Tom Cadwallader, Dennis Cosgrove, Jim Quick, Gerald Jaeger, and Bob Eder for their contributions to this article.

Laura Paine is University of Wisconsin-Extension Crops and Soils Agent for Columbia County and has worked with grazing networks and done on-farm grazing research for 10 years with the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She can be contacted at: PO Box 567, Portage, WI 53901, 608/742-9682, laura.paine@ces.uwex.edu. She's always interested in feedback and ideas for future articles.
