

## GrassWorks Vision for the Future

*By Laura Paine*

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In my last column, I reviewed the history of GrassWorks, the farmer-led organization responsible for the annual Wisconsin Grazing Conference (being held in Stevens Point on February 16 to 18 this year). By taking a look at its past, the GrassWorks board took the first step toward constructing a meaningful future for the organization. This time, we'll talk about the vision that the current board members developed to give themselves direction for the next couple of years. Every year or two, as board members turn over, the board will meet again to review this vision and adjust it to make sure GrassWorks remains relevant to farmer needs and interests.

In the spirit of a true grassroots organization, the GrassWorks board of directors is made up of representatives of local grazing networks. Any network with five or more paid GrassWorks members can have a representative on the GrassWorks board of directors. Currently, farmers representing their networks include Lyle Guralski, Joe Tomandl, Jim Quick, Gerald Jaeger, Bob Eder, Harley Troester.

GrassWorks' mission statement provides a general direction for the organization: "GrassWorks, Inc., a membership association, links farmers through local networks and provides leadership, education, and research support to promote grass-based farming." The question for board members at their September retreat was: what do we need to put in place to live up to that mission? The following paragraphs summarize the goals the board defined.

What innovative, practical actions will help GrassWorks fulfill its mission? Ideas we generated can be sorted into three broad categories: informing and educating members and the public, building an effective association, and growing that association. Although informing and educating is the most important aspect of GrassWorks mission, the board recognized that an effective organizational structure would be necessary if GrassWorks is to fulfill its mission.

### Building an Effective Association

An organization is only as strong as its members. Skilled, energetic leaders really make a difference in a group's effectiveness. GrassWorks has always been blessed with great thinkers and doers leading the way and these folks are vital to the long-term strength of the organization. They're also aware that we can't and shouldn't depend on just a few people to always carry the weight of leading. An underlying goal of all association building efforts is to attract new leadership (want to volunteer?). The following are some specific goals the board identified.

Board members hope to move GrassWorks toward being recognized as a state and national leader in grazing issues. They envision the organization being a statewide voice for grass farming in Wisconsin, an organization that makes a difference. Both leadership and learning are involved in this vision. Their goals are to become a clearinghouse of information, to be the number one source for information for new grass-farmers, and to provide support for local networks and statewide coordination of grazing activities.

All organizations need money to function. One on-going effort will be to develop stable funding mechanisms. As busy as farmers are and as widespread as grass farmers are in the state, the organization needs a someone

who can devote time to carrying out their objectives. To provide on-going funding for coordinator Paul Nehring is an important goal.

Another way to get things done is to work with other organizations that complement your group's strengths. Thus, developing strategic alliances is another goal for GrassWorks. The board hopes to develop partnerships with like-minded organizations to achieve mutually agreed-on goals. Possible partners would include farmer organizations, environmental organizations, and agencies. Several board members expressed a strong interest in shifting the University and UW Extension toward a more supportive position on grazing, including having greater assistance available through county Extension offices and influencing UW Dairy Science to do more grazing research.

### Growing the Association

For the first 6 years of its existence, GrassWorks had an informal structure. One of the biggest changes it's had recently was becoming a membership association. This change is the foundation of the new GrassWorks. As a membership association, it has a base of committed support, a means of accountability, and a fund-raising mechanism. The first few years are most critical for many organizations and growing GrassWorks is a necessary, important goal for the near future. Here are the targets they're shooting for.

GrassWorks currently has 188 members from 20 networks in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Over the next two years, the board would like to increase membership to 300 to 500. By developing a formal recruiting process, they hope to put in place a stable structure resulting in good farmer support for the organization and financial stability.

The GrassWorks board set for itself some pretty ambitious goals. They'd like their efforts to result in more cows on the landscape with a 20% increase in acres grazed per year.

GrassWorks would like to promote a compelling, inspirational, zealous message about grazing. The enthusiasm for grazing among grass farmers never ceases to amaze me. As bad as things have been economically for farmers in general and dairy farmers in particular these past couple of years, the goal here is not desperation, but inspiration. These folks hope to revolutionize dairy farming in the Upper Midwest. From a practical standpoint, they hope to be able to afford a 'full-time grazing zealot' to get their message across (making coordinator Paul Nehring's job full-time).

### Informing and Educating Members and the Public

GrassWorks exists to share information. The board hopes to create a clearinghouse for grazing information, expertise, and research for not only members but for the general public as well. To do this effectively, both of the above categories need to be in place, plus a few more concrete things.

One goal will be to establish an on-going farmer-driven research program. Although grazing research has increased in Wisconsin, there is still a need for more information. The board envisioned a system of research station and on-farm research that would be on-going and farmer-driven. GrassWorks can lead in not only disseminating, but generating new information to keep grass-farmers improving.

A key feature of GrassWorks has been providing a statewide communication system. In keeping with its grassroots structure, the board set goals for enhancing between network interactions to 'spread the good news' about managed grazing. To achieve this, there were several ideas including developing a monthly newsletter to be distributed statewide by mail and by email, setting up a GrassWorks website and a computer-based grazing school.

The GrassWorks board sees one of its most important functions as supporting and developing local networks. GrassWorks hopes to become known as a 'planter of networks,' assisting local networks in starting up in new

areas and supporting existing networks, with the goal of having a local network available to any livestock farmer, anywhere in the state. In addition, having a Grazing Specialist, like Brian Pillsbury available to farmers throughout the state will help new graziers with the transition. Finally, the board hopes that this process will result in the identification of new leaders to help GrassWorks stay strong into the future.

#### An Educational, Inspirational Annual Conference

All participants agreed that one of GrassWorks' key responsibilities was to continue improving the annual Wisconsin Grazing Conference that Carl Fredericks and others started. The board's goal is to make it more real, more exciting, more worthwhile, and for the conference to be profitable and informative—in short, to make it the best attended conference in the Midwest.

Look for more information on the Wisconsin Grazing Conference in this and other publications or contact Paul Nehring at 715-261-6000 or [pmnehring@mail.co.marathon.wi.us](mailto:pmnehring@mail.co.marathon.wi.us). Conference information will also be posted on the UWEX Grazing Website: <http://www.uwrf.edu/grazing/#Links>.

GrassWorks has the potential to achieve a lot for Wisconsin livestock farmers. This farmer-led group has done a great deal with minimal structure in the past. Creating a structure for broader representation of local grazing networks across the state will help encourage a long-lasting association with periodic infusions of new leaders with new ideas. The structure need not be a hindrance to creativity. It is simply a foundation from which to spring.

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