

Northeast Pasture Consortium News Update October 2015

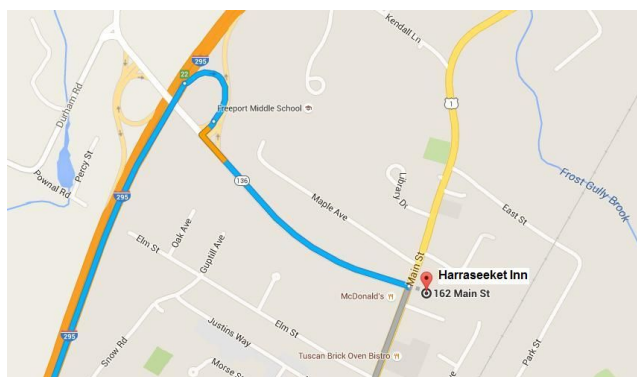
Linking Graziers, Researchers, Extension, and Technicians

<http://grazingguide.net/> James Cropper, Executive Director & Editor

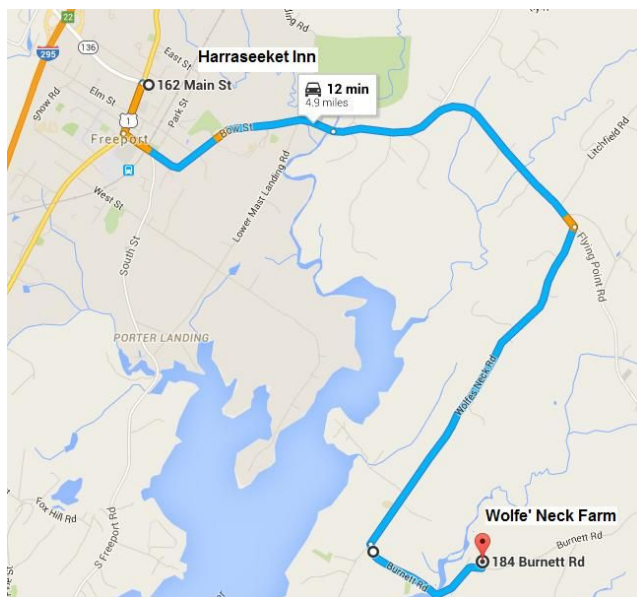


2016 Northeast Pasture Consortium Annual Conference & Meeting

Our annual conference and meeting in 2016 will be at the Harraseeket Inn on March 16-17 in Freeport, Maine. The Harraseeket Inn is located a half mile from I-295 Exit 22 at 162 Main Street. This is within 5 miles of Wolfe's Neck Farm where a new program has been initiated, the Organic Dairy Farmer Training Program. We hope to have a tour set up to visit Wolfe's Neck Farm on Friday, March 18, after our conference.



Harraseeket Inn Location in Freeport, ME



Directions to Wolfe's Neck Farm from Harraseeket Inn

Your Executive Committee has decided on these

topics for the 2016 conference: Transitioning dairy cows to a no-grain or high forage diet, USDA risk management options for forage and pasture farms, status of forage plant breeding research, orchardgrass die-off research progress report, our popular Producer Showcase featuring Maine farmers, riparian grazing management update, recognizing the 20th anniversary of the Northeast Pasture Consortium - historical overview, and the rebirth of pasture past, present, and future. The January newsletter will contain the registration form and a detailed agenda complete with speakers and the title of their presentations.

Driving Directions:

From the South:

- Take I-95 North to exit 52, Falmouth,
- Go through tollbooth and take the exit for I-295 North,
- Take exit 22,
- Take a left off the exit ramp onto ME-136,
- Follow 1/2 mile to stop light, the Harraseeket Inn will be directly in front of you.

From the North:

- Take I-295 South to exit 22,
- Take a right off the exit,
- Follow 1/2 mile to stop light, the Harraseeket Inn will be directly in front of you.

From Portland International Jetport:

- Head northwest on Al McKay Ave/Jetport Access Rd toward Jetport Blvd,
- Continue on Jetport Access Rd (0.4 mi)
- Turn right onto Congress St. (2.0 mi),
- Use the right lane to take the I-295 N/US Route 1 N ramp to Falmouth (0.2 mi),
- Merge onto I-295 N/U.S. 1 N and continue to follow I-295 N (17.8 mi),
- Take exit 22 for ME-125/ME-136 toward

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Freeport (0.1 mi)

- Turn left onto ME-125 S/ME-136 S (0.4 mi),
- Turn right onto Main St, destination on the left.

2016 Maine Grass Farmers Network Conference

The next Maine Grass Farmers Network Conference is scheduled for March 19, 2016 the Saturday after our conference. At this time there are no details available about this conference, the January NEPC news update will give you all the details on where it will be held and its program.

Another higher learning institution now has an organic dairy program. The University of New Hampshire was the first university in the Nation to have an organic dairy facility. It is at the Burley-Demeritt and Bartlett-Dudley properties near UNH campus. Alfred State in western New York joins UNH in offering a similar experience for students and interested farmers in our Region.

Alfred State College Offers Unique Blend of Organic Dairy Education

From the *Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance Newsletter*

September 10, 2015.

By Joan Sinclair Petzen, Cornell Cooperative Extension Northwest New York Dairy, Livestock and Field Crops Team



Alfred State heifer barn.

Nearly ten years ago, Alfred State College chose a path of operating both organic and conventional dairies to create a unique learning environment among dairy colleges. Farm manager Virginia Chamberlain has been managing the farm since the fall of 2013. In a college farm setting, one must remember, the student-teacher needs come first when operating a farm laboratory.

“Alfred State started as an agricultural institution, so we take that heritage seriously as we think about farming and its future”, stated Joseph Greenthal, comptroller with the Pioneer Center at the College. He further said, “Our farm continues to evolve, and we look to create a niche in the industry as we invest in our facilities and look for ways to broaden our offerings to our current and prospective students.”

The farm is located on 1100 acres of land, 550 acres of which are tillable, and 62 are dedicated to pasture. The remainder of the land near campus is woodlands. Much of the tillable acreage is located in Groveland, New York and was “inherited” from the New York State Prison System when they disbanded their farming operations.

Since 2009, the farm facilities have been retooled and a new robotic freestall was completed in 2011. Alfred’s organic dairy is housed in the three-row freestall with a covered feed alley and milked robotically. Manure from the freestall is scraped into a concrete manure storage with three months capacity. Their conventional herd resides in a tie-stall barn and is milked in a single-side herringbone milking parlor. The two herds are clearly identified with contrasting color ear tags.

Another key resource at the Alfred State College dairy is Farm Manager Virginia Chamberlain. Virginia grew up near Syracuse, New York next door to the small dairy her father and grandfather ran until the milking herd was sold when she was twelve. She graduated from the University of

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New Hampshire–Durham, in 2011, where she worked with both conventional and organic dairies. Virginia participated in the University's Cooperative Real Education in Agricultural Management program, CREAM, a student-run cooperative. CREAM is a yearlong course that gives 25 students the opportunity to gain hands on experience in working with Holstein dairy cows, while managing and operating a small business.



Alfred State Dairy Free-stall Barn

According to Virginia, “After working with cows again in college I was hooked. Cows continue to inspire me to this day. The dairy industry has such a wide range of opportunities, you can really do anything you want through the medium of cows.” Since college she did herd work on both a conventional robotic and an organic dairy. Virginia says, “I was drawn to Alfred because it had two of the things I’m passionate about: grazing and robotics all in a college setting.” With her passion and leadership, Virginia is able to manage the Alfred dairy to help faculty achieve their goals with students.

Alfred’s organic farm is certified by NOFA- NY. Alfred works closely with certifier, Erica Worden and Organic Valley field representative Dave Hardy. Because of their position as a teaching institution, an exception was granted to allow organic and conventional herds on the same site. Feed for the two herds is segregated in two different storage and mixing areas. Much of the

Alfred acreage was able to be certified organic when they started the transition of the organic dairy because of careful planning of their cropping practices. They are in the three year process of transitioning more acreage at Groveland to organic.

For now, let’s focus on the organic herd. It consists of two-thirds Holsteins with Genex based breeding that originated from the Attica Prison herd. This part of the herd completed their transition to organic in 2012. The remainder of the herd, Jersey/Holstein crosses, were purchased as a whole certified herd.

The new free-stall at Alfred features sand bedding and is ventilated with sidewall curtains. Stalls are bedded weekly. The 60-cow herd produces 60 pounds of milk per cow per day and each cow visits the robot 2.5 to 2.7 times per day in the winter when confined and 2.0 to 2.3 times per day in the summer when on pasture. The organic herd somatic cell count runs between 70,000 and 80,000 in the winter and peaks in the summer at 120,000 cells/ml. For components, their butterfat test is 3.8% and protein is 3.0%.

An independent nutritionist is contracted to develop rations for both college herds. A partial total mixed ration (TMR) is fed in the barn four to five times throughout the day to entice cows to return from pasture to the robot to be milked and to feed. Approximately eight pounds of grain is fed through the robot in addition to the TMR. Farm Manager Chamberlain describes their farming system as fairly high input.

Milking herd feeding includes rotational pasture with fresh forage offered twice daily by moving fences and switching paddocks. They strive for a 21-day rotation across all paddocks. Their goal is to feed 40% to 45% of dry matter from pasture in the summer. In winter of 2013 and summer of 2014, they did not have organic corn silage to

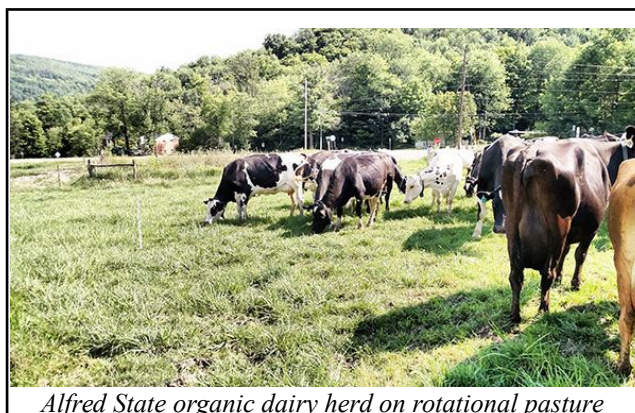
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feed so the ration consisted of hay crop silage, dry hay and grain. In 2014, organic corn silage was added to the winter ration at the rate of 15 pounds of dry matter per cow. They continue to feed corn silage in the summer of 2015 with observed benefits of more consistent body condition scores and milk urea nitrogen levels, and more consistent milk production.



Alfred State organic dairy herd on rotational pasture

A bedded-pack barn with a south-facing feed apron houses the dry cows and heifers for both the organic and conventional herds in separate sections. Each pen has access to pasture. During the summer, heifers are all grazed after weaning. Calves 4 to 6 months of age have access to pasture with limited rotation, moving fence every two to three weeks. Heifers 7 to 10 months of age are on full rotational pasture feed. Breeding age animals feed mostly on pasture and are given just enough TMR to attract them back to the barn each day to be able to catch them up for breeding. Bred heifers and dry cows receive pasture, a mineral package and kelp.

Because this is a state-owned herd, all livestock must be sold at a public sale. Therefore, cull cows and bull calves are marketed through traditional auction markets along with those from the conventional herd. During 2015, Alfred was able to offer 10 organic dairy heifers for sale. They anticipate heifer sales will supplement milk sales as an income source going forward.

Alfred's organic dairy is on a full vaccination protocol based upon stage of lactation. It is the same as their conventional herd, excepting JVac. Veterinary costs in their convention herd, including the synchronization program, run four times that of the organic herd. They see more mastitis (inflammation of the udder), pneumonia, and transition cow issues in the conventional herd, which is averaging 80 pounds of milk per cow per day. Supportive treatments for the organic herd include *Bovikalc* (calcium bolus for cows to maintain adequate serum calcium levels in freshening cows to prevent milk fever) to all fresh cows, flushing with aloe vera and betadine tablets for metritis (after-calving uterine infection), and *Udder Comfort* rub and frequent milk out are used if mastitis arises. Clinical cows are kept separate to facilitate frequent milk out, and put through the robot and back to the special pen until the infection is cleared.



Farm manager Virginia Chamberlain at the robot milking computer.

Chamberlain mentioned some needs she sees for the organic dairy business in the region. First of all, more competition in the marketplace for grain and supplies would help producers keep costs under control. Increased availability of "organic-minded" veterinary and other service professionals would be valuable resources for producers in the region. Faculty in the veterinary technology and dairy programs are also resources

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for the Alfred State College Dairy. Alfred currently coordinates with a neighboring farm for delivery of pelleted feed on the same load so both farms save on delivery costs.

“Alfred’s potential in the organic community is just budding”, according to Chamberlain. Now that they are becoming an established organic dairy, they are looking forward to hosting more field days and are planning a lecture series /discussion group for organic producers. Alfred seeks to be at the forefront of helping farmers learn how to talk about what they do and how they do it. It is important to note, when “students come first” sometimes a college farm must maintain costly endeavors for educational purposes as opposed to choosing alternatives that might make more business sense for an independent dairy farm.

Currently, there are 65 students in the Ag program and typically graduate around 25 each year. Students graduate with an Associate’s degree or continue their education in baccalaureate programs either at Alfred State or at other institutions. Their students come to Alfred primarily for dairy, but increasingly they are seeing students interested in organic dairy, organic crop/vegetable production and Ag business. These students represent a broad range of backgrounds, but most commonly are from farming backgrounds and range in age from 18 to 50 and are about evenly divided between men and women. Most students find positions in agriculture or return to the family farm after graduation. The program has an employment and transfer rate of 93 percent – 57 percent are employed; 36 percent transferred to continue their education.

The Dairy Program at Alfred State College has a central goal of graduating students with good, solid dairy skills, who can be successful working with cows. Students have the opportunity to work hands-on in both production systems com-

paring and contrasting the pros and cons of each system. Producers using either system can learn from one another to become better dairy managers. Alfred State is carving out a niche in dairy education to meet the needs of a diverse dairy industry in the Region and their organic dairy is an important part of the package they offer.

Joan Sinclair Petzen, Business Farm Management Specialist, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Northwest New York Dairy, Livestock and Field Crops Team, facilitated "The Next Generation of Organic Dairy Farmers: What do ‘Millennials’ see as the future of farming?" panel discussion, at the 15th Annual NODPA Field Days on October 1-2, 2015 in Pavilion, NY. Joan can be reached by email at: JSP10@Cornell.edu or by phone, 585-786-2251, ext. 122.

We have faced many challenges in keeping pasture research alive and well in the Northeast Region. We have been successful in ensuring that the Pasture Systems and Watershed Management Research Unit of USDA-ARS remained open and gained strength by becoming a Long Term Agro-Ecosystem Research (LTAR) facility and also being a key part of the Northeast Regional Climate Hub. We have also seen two higher learning institutions, University of New Hampshire and Alfred State College start organic dairy research facilities recently. On the other hand, we saw the closure of two ARS research units, North Appalachian Experimental Watershed at Coshocton, OH (They did several studies on water quality effects of livestock grazing pastures) and the Appalachian Farming Systems Research Center at Beaver, WV (They did wide ranging work on switchgrass, biological control of intestinal worms, and silvopasture procedures on promoting pasture under growing trees among other endeavors). Our next conference will focus on what we have left to do and how we might achieve results. With that in mind, CSA News recently published *The Future of Grazing Re-*

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search. With their permission, here are two of those articles.



What is the future of grazing research?

August 14, 2015

By Madeline Fisher

With all the talk about maize, wheat, and rice production around the globe, it's easy to forget that the world's largest agricultural land use by far is grassland grazed by livestock.

Grazinglands occupy some four billion hectares of the planet today, with 316 million hectares in the United States alone and another 200 million in Brazil—today's second-largest producer of beef behind the United States.



Angus cattle on pasture. USDA photo by Lance Cheung

Pasture-based dairying is also on the rise. New Zealand's dairy herd, for example, has doubled in the last two decades to 6.5 million animals, nearly all of which graze forage year-round. And the trend isn't likely to slow anytime soon, as consumption of meat and dairy products keeps climbing and consumers clamor for grass-fed beef.

Yet, while the world's managed grasslands remain vast, the pool of scientists who study them is dwindling. In a 2009 paper that assessed the state of affairs in the southern United States, the authors reported a nearly 50% reduction in forage and animal scientists at land grant

universities from 1984 to 2004, along with similar cuts to teaching and extension positions. And the situation hasn't gotten better since.

"There are fewer numbers of grazing researchers now than anytime in last 50 years," says ASA and CSSA member Twain Butler, a grazing systems scientist with The Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation in Oklahoma.



Twain Butler reviews tall fescue test plots. Photo courtesy of the Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation, Ardmore, OK.

One challenge is that forages are not considered a major commodity like corn or soybeans with "producer boards and check-off dollars to help fund needed research," Butler says. Meanwhile, the funding sources that grassland researchers do rely on to answer producers' questions have "dried up," adds University of Florida professor and ASA and CSSA Fellow, Lynn Sollenberger.

Forging the future

These realities explain both the attrition of grassland scientists and why those who are left must compete so hard for funds. But the community is hardly giving up. At the 2014 ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Annual Meeting in Long Beach, CA, Butler organized a symposium on the future of grazing research and its continued relevance as a science.



That symposium has now become a special section of papers scheduled for the November-December 2015 issue of Crop Science, and alongside the obstacles are some definite opportunities. One of the biggest is grasslands' unparalleled capacity among agroecosystems to provide ecosystem services. Beyond producing food, managed grazinglands can help improve water quality and soil health, promote biodiversity, increase wildlife habitat, mitigate greenhouse gas emissions...the list goes on and on.

But we know relatively little about this potential today, Sollenberger says. "So, there's a need to broaden our traditional, production-oriented research themes and our research teams—which are heavy on forage agronomists and animal scientists—to address new categories of responses to grassland management practices."

He cautions that while these areas do offer new avenues for research support, their investigation must be balanced with the continuing need of producers for applied information. And grazing research is full of other challenges, as well. Vast tracts of land and many years of data collection are required for experiments to achieve any semblance of the real world. Plus, research plots stocked with animals generally demand 24/7 attention.

To those involved, though, the possible rewards are well worth the effort.

"Just think how much more we could do for conservation if we could figure out a way for agricultural producers, the dominant landowners in North America, to do practices that would benefit conservation and not hurt production—or maybe even help production," says Sam Fuhlen-dorf, a grasslands ecologist at Oklahoma State University.

(Editor's note: We are planning to have Lynn Sollenberger speak at our 2016 conference.)

Mob Grazing Shows Possible Production, Ecological Benefits

by Tanner Ehmke

Imagine bison roaming the Great Plains, grazing in dense herds and constantly on the move. Imitating that natural grazing pattern with modern livestock could make today's ranches more sustainable and productive.

Mob grazing—also known as mob stocking—is under the microscope with researchers like ASA, CSSA, and SSSA member Ben Tracy, a grassland ecologist at Virginia Tech, comparing it to other forms of grazing like rotational and continuous grazing in a large-scale study on 150 acres in Virginia's humid grassland environment. After three years of conducting a study with funding from a USDA-NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant, Tracy and a team of researchers are analyzing the preliminary data for the potential benefits and drawbacks of mob grazing.

The difference between mob grazing and other approaches to livestock and pasture management, he says, is livestock density and the amount of time grazing and resting the pasture.

"Mob stocking is a form of extreme rotational grazing where you get a fairly high density of animals and you move them through paddocks much more rapidly than you normally would in a rotational grazing system," Tracy explains. "The idea is that the animals will graze more evenly and maybe distribute manure and urine more evenly, but not graze everything to the ground."

The other key feature to very high stocking rates is allowing plenty of time for the land to recover. In a traditional rotational grazing program, a paddock might be grazed every three to four weeks. But in mob grazing, the pasture would be grazed once or twice a year. In continuous grazing,



meanwhile, there is no rest period from grazing.



Photo courtesy of Ben Tracy.

Thanks in part of Allan Savory's TED talk on mob grazing, the practice has received a lot of attention in the popular press, Tracy says. Tracy hopes this study will help quantify the production and ecological benefits of mob stocking, including soil health, forage quality and species composition in Virginia.

"We're trying to get some data to see whether mob stocking—at least here in our humid grasslands—is good, bad, or neither compared with other grazing systems."

Ecological Benefits

While the data at this point is preliminary, Tracy points out that the observations gathered so far show that mob grazing does have ecological benefits.

Higher soil organic matter is one benefit from mob grazing, Tracy notes. In the long run, improved soil health translates into a myriad of benefits like better water-holding capacity, climate resiliency, and overall productivity of the

grassland. That's a significant benefit for grasslands facing drought conditions, he says.

"In the fall, when we started to get some pretty good rainfall, we found that the grasses under mob stocking actually recovered faster," Tracy says. "Once they got some rain, they recovered faster and actually had higher protein content compared with the other systems. So we think maybe that might be an indication of a more resilient system that can weather the drought a little better."

Tracy hypothesizes that the longer rest periods between grazing gives the grass a longer time to recover and perhaps put more energy into root growth, thereby increasing resiliency of the system. The higher amounts of residual grass trampled on the ground, he adds, may also help conserve water.

The preliminary data also suggest that mob grazing also increases the amount of bioavailable or labile-type carbon in the soil, which Tracy says could be an indicator of carbon sequestration. With grazinglands covering about one-third of the earth's surface, there could be potential for reducing CO₂ levels and having some effect on climate change.

Challenges

Mob grazing, however, has its challenges. Because of the high density stocking rates, Tracy figures about 30% of the forage is trampled to the ground and not consumed by the animals.

ASA and CSSA member John Guretzky, a University of Nebraska–Lincoln grassland ecologist who is also working with a team studying mob grazing with funding from USDA-NRCS, agrees that the amount of forage consumption declines, which in turn, hurts average daily gains for the animals.

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“One of the challenges of mob grazing is when you’re stocked at those higher densities, the animals are right next to each other and you can potentially limit their intake or their consumption of forage,” Guretzky explains. “If you’re going to limit their intake, you’re going to hurt animal performance and bring down animal gains and total production.”

Tracy points out that with the frequent movement of animals from one paddock to the next, labor requirements are also significantly higher for the operator. Those drawbacks, though, may have a larger payoff.

“It’s important because grazinglands are such a huge part of the world,” Tracy notes. “So, how to manage them better is really something we need to know a little bit more about, but I think we still have room to learn.”

(Editor's Note: Ben Tracy is the advisor of doctoral candidate Gordon Jones at Virginia Tech. Gordon is studying orchardgrass die-off and was a featured speaker at this year's conference.)

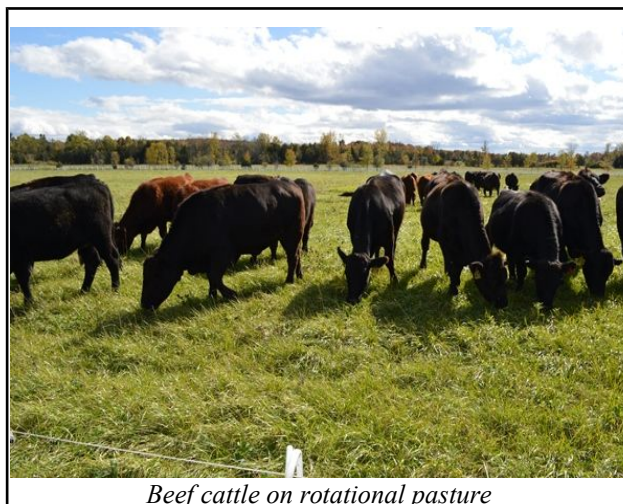
USDA Announces Conservation Incentives for Working Grass, Range and Pasture Lands

Beginning Sept. 1, farmers and ranchers can apply for financial assistance to help conserve working grasslands, rangeland, and pastureland while maintaining the areas as livestock grazing lands.

The initiative is part of the voluntary Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), a federally funded program that for 30 years has assisted agricultural producers with the cost of restoring, enhancing and protecting certain grasses, shrubs, and trees to improve water quality, prevent soil erosion and reduce loss of wildlife habitat. In

return, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides participants with rental payments and cost-share assistance. CRP has helped farmers and ranchers prevent more than 8 billion tons of soil from eroding, **reduce nitrogen and phosphorus runoff relative to cropland by 95 and 85 percent respectively**, and even **sequester 43 million tons of greenhouse gases annually, equal to taking 8 million cars off the road**.

The CRP-Grasslands initiative will provide participants who establish long-term, resource-conserving covers with annual rental payments up to 75 percent of the grazing value of the land. Cost-share assistance also is available for up to 50 percent of the covers and other practices, such as cross fencing to support rotational grazing or improving pasture cover to benefit pollinators or other wildlife. Participants may still conduct common grazing practices, produce hay, mow, or harvest for seed production, conduct fire rehabilitation, and construct firebreaks and fences.



Beef cattle on rotational pasture

With the publication of the CRP regulation today, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) will accept applications on an ongoing basis beginning Sept. 1, 2015, with those applications scored against published ranking criteria, and approved based on

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the competitiveness of the offer. The ranking period will occur at least once per year and be announced at least 30 days prior to its start. The end of the first ranking period will be Nov. 20, 2015.



Fall pasture in Maine

To learn more about participating in CRP-Grasslands, visit www.fsa.usda.gov/ (Editor's note: On the FSA homepage screen, click on Programs & Services near the top of page, then highlight Conservation Programs which calls up another pop-up screen, directly across will appear Conservation Reserve Program, click on it, once Conservation Reserve Screen appears, click on Grassland Reserve Program under Related Topics on left side of screen.) or consult with the local FSA county office. If you need to locate a nearby FSA office, visit <http://offices.usda.gov>. To learn more about the 30th anniversary of CRP, visit www.fsa.usda.gov/CRPis30 or follow on Twitter using #CRPis30.

Subcommittee reviews research innovations achieved by the nation's agricultural colleges and universities

US House of Representatives, Committee on Agriculture
September 29, 2015

Today, Rep. Rodney Davis (R-IL), Chairman of the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research, held a public hearing to review research innovations achieved by the nation's agricultural colleges and universities. Members heard from a panel of distinguished researchers representing some of the most prestigious agricultural colleges and universities in the Country.

Today's hearing was the third in a series of hearings highlighting agricultural research, extension, and education programs. Back in April, the subcommittee held a hearing with Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Krysta Harden and 17 young leaders in the 4-H program who spoke about the need to strengthen the urban, rural coalition. Then, in July, the full Agriculture Committee held a hearing to honor the 125th anniversary of the enactment of the Second Morrill Act of 1890, during which the presidents of the 1890 land-grant universities shared with the committee their views regarding advancements their universities have made and the challenges faced by the agriculture community. Furthermore, two weeks ago the committee heard from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Research, Education, and Economics division who emphasized the return on investment from agriculture research. The International Food Policy Research Institute has concluded that these investments have a **48% average annual rate of return**.

“Over the course of this hearing series we have seen and heard first-hand the high rate of return from investments in agricultural research and innovation. I am excited to see stakeholders prioritizing the need for food and agricultural research within our national policy discussions. As we begin preparing for the next farm bill, we will look to these stakeholders and the challenges they are facing to establish policies that will allow our research sector to continue to evolve and grow. I want to thank all of our witnesses for

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their participation today, especially Dr. Hau-ser, Dean of the University of Illinois, College of Agriculture, for his insight on this topic specific to my district and home state of Illinois,” Subcommittee Chairman Davis said.



Field studies are monitoring changes in soil carbon in pasture and grassland systems at ARS-University Park.

“Investments in agricultural innovation and research are an important way to strengthen and improve our industry. With the population expected to reach 10 billion by 2050, farmers and ranchers need all the tools that agricultural researchers can provide to meet these food and fiber needs. I am proud to see that federal investment in agricultural research is paying dividends to our industry, and universities like the ones we heard from today are utilizing these resources to lead this productive advancement in agriculture.” Agriculture Committee Chairman K. Michael Conaway said.

Witness List:

Dr. Robert J. Hauser, Dean of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Science, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL

Dr. James W. Moyer, Associate Dean for Research, College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences, Washington State University, Pullman, WA

Dr. Mindy Brashears, Director of the International Center for Food Industry Excellence, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX

Dr. Michael Heithaus, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Florida International University, North Miami, FL

Dr. Michael P. Lacy, Professor and Department Head, Department of Poultry Science, University of Georgia, Athens, GA

Dr. Douglas D. Buhler, Senior Associate Dean for Research, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI

As a teaser for our upcoming 2016 session on risk management for grass-based livestock farms. Here is a recent announcement from the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition that whole farm revenue protection crop insurance policies are now available nationwide. Our farmer members should check this out. It could prove to be a farm saver.

RMA Announces that Whole-Farm will be the First Universally Available Crop Insurance Policy

From National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's (NSAC) Blog
August 27, 2015

On August 27, USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA) announced the expansion of the Whole-Farm Revenue Protection (WFRP) crop insurance policy to every state and every county, making WFRP the first crop insurance policy to be universally available nationwide.

WFRP is a single crop insurance policy that insures all of a farmer's crops and animals under

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one policy. Since most single crop policies are not widely available, this policy fills a major access gap in our current crop insurance system.

The announcement, which came in advance of the September 1st deadline for changes to crop insurance policies for 2016, also includes several other important changes that NSAC requested in comments submitted in April that will benefit farmers that have not previously had viable access to crop insurance.

Beginning Farmers

For 2016, beginning farmers that started farming in 2012 will now be eligible to purchase a WFRP policy, which is two years earlier than they would have under the current policy. Instead of five years of tax records, farmers will now only need three years of records in order to qualify for insurance coverage. The need for WFRP to be more accessible to beginning farmers was a major concern for NSAC and our members and was one of our top requests of RMA.



The required lag year remains in place, which is why for the 2016 crop year a farmer will have to have tax records going back to 2012 in order to qualify. The revenue from the lag year and the lowest of the four tax years will be used to

calculate the average farm revenue as if there were five years of tax records available.

Farmers Selling to Direct Markets

Farmers that market their crops directly to the public will now see streamlined recordkeeping requirements for Whole-Farm in 2016.

The policy will allow contemporaneous price records to be used to calculate the farmer's actual revenue during the insurance year. Previously, farmers needed third party verified records, which is extremely hard to obtain by farmers that market directly to the public through roadside stands and farmers' markets.

Confusion about what records farmers needed in order to comply with the requirements of Whole-Farm policy was an often repeated concern of farmers and crop insurance agents in 2015, and we are excited to see this change being made. Streamlined recordkeeping was another top priority for NSAC in order to improve the program.

Farmers will be required to keep daily records for each kind of crop, but not individual sales receipts. This will not change the ability of farmers to use wholesale contracts and other third party verified records for other sales.

This is an important improvement that should make the policy more useful and attractive to a segment of farmers that have had little access to crop insurance in the past. These types of farmers often grow several types of crops on acreages that are often too small to insure with traditional single crop policies. In most cases there are no single crop policies even available in their state or county for many of the crops they grow.

For these farmers, Whole-Farm is their only option; this change should make it a more viable option.

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RMA has posted handy recordkeeping aids for direct marketers on its Whole-Farm web page. These basic tools will help farmers that market directly to the public understand what records they need to keep.

Other Changes

RMA announced several other changes to its Whole-Farm policy, including:

- Eliminating the 35 percent limit on expected revenue from animals and animal products, and greenhouse and nursery crops, while retaining the overall cap of \$1 million on revenue from these sources remains in place (note – diversified crop-livestock farmers cited this cap as the main reason they were not able to purchase a Whole-Farm policy and NSAC included this request in our comments in April);
- Allowing farmers who have been physically unable to farm for a year, such as because of illness or military deployment, to be able to substitute the lag year for the missing year;
- Expanding eligibility to tax-exempt organizations to qualify if they have appropriate records to substitute for tax records; and
- Increasing the ability of expanding operations to obtain increased coverage by increasing the expanding operations limit to 35 percent.

Basics of Whole-Farm Revenue Protection Insurance

WFRP, which was first offered for the 2015 crop year, replaced and modified the previously existing Whole-Farm policies AGR and AGR-Lite.

Whole-Farm offers higher coverage levels, premium discounts for increased diversity, coverage for market readiness activities and expanding operations, and higher subsidy rates.



This policy, unlike traditional yield or revenue insurance, is not intended for a single specific crop, but for all the crops and livestock grown or raised on a single farm. This will especially help diversified sustainable and organic farms that do not have single crop policies or price elections available for one or more of the crops grown.

Learn more about Whole-Farm in NSAC's Grassroots Guide to Federal Farm and Food Programs.

How Farmers Can Purchase Whole-Farm

Beginning September 1, farmers can begin signing up for WFRP and will have until January 31, February 28 or March 15, depending on the spring closing date for their county, to purchase the insurance.

Farmers interested in the policy should start by reviewing RMA's fact sheet on WFRP and then talk to their crop insurance agent about the records they will need to assemble and what the purchase deadline is for their county. RMA also

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has several other resources available to help farmers decide if WFRP is right for them.

Notable Changes and Benefits Already Included in WFRP

- An \$8.5 million limit on insured revenue (an increase from \$6.5 million under AGR and \$1 million under AGR-Lite);
- Coverage level options of 50-85 percent of historical revenue, with the two highest levels available when at least three crops are grown (an increase from the previous 80 percent cap under AGR and AGR-Lite);
- Premium subsidy of up to 80 percent when at least two crops are grown (a significant increase over the highest subsidy rate of 59 percent provided under AGR-Lite and the 67 percent provided by Basic Unit revenue policies);
- Premium discount for increased diversification stair stepped up to 7 crops;
- Coverage for livestock and nursery and greenhouse plants (capped at revenue up to \$1 million each);
- Inclusion of some incidental processing expenses necessary to make the commodity ready for market, such as washing, trimming, and packaging;
- Increased coverage for expanding operations;
- Replant coverage for a crop losses early enough for replanting; and
- Continuation of the option to insure individual crops under separate crop policies (cannot be CAT level coverage) while using Whole-Farm for everything else.

Conclusion

NSAC is very pleased with RMA's efforts to improve Whole-Farm for 2016. We appreciate that

RMA moved quickly to respond to our comments and those of agents and farmers on how the first year of Whole-Farm went. We look forward to promoting Whole-Farm for 2016, while also continuing to look for ways to improve the policy in the future.



The News Update Credo

The Northeast Pasture Consortium News Update is published semi-annually, a late summer-fall issue and winter issue. The goal of these news updates is to keep our Consortium members abreast of the latest research and technology that most impact pasture-based farmers, inform them about the upcoming annual conference, and provide a forum to guide and formulate good policies and best management practices that keep pasture-based farms profitable, efficient, and environmentally sound.

