



2024 AgTimes



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MARIES COUNTY **Advocate**

Luecke shares Lazy Acres tractor collection

BY ROXIE MURPHY
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BELLE — Jerry Luecke is an antique tractor enthusiast from Bland with more than 40 examples of traction motors in his possession At Lazy Acres Farm.

“Most of them I buy and restore,” Luecke said. “I do have a couple of people who restore them for me. From start to beginning it takes about a year to restore one depending on what they have to do to it.”

See **COLLECTION** on Page 4



PHOTO BY DENNIS WARDEN

JERRY LUECKE sits on his Cletrac Avery Crawler during the 2023 Gasconade County Thresher’s Show in Rosebud. This crawler was used during World War II to move planes. Luecke also took two other crawlers to the show an orange Avery (center) and a Greel Oliver HD.

COVER PHOTOS: Antique Tractor enthusiast Jerry Luecke has over 40 tractors in his collection in Bland including those pictured on the cover (clockwise from top left) — 1974 Oliver 2655 with a Moline diesel engine (this was when Oliver bought Minneapolis Moline), 1974 Oliver 2255 Front Wheel Assist with a 3150 Cat Motor, BF Avery Crawler, a 1930 Thieman Tractor that was converted to a hearse by it’s previous owner from Nebraska, a rare 1965 Oliver 770 Orchard Propane driven by Brooklyn Worth, Luecke’s granddaughter and a 1965 Oliver Snow Blaster, this is the only one built (currently being restored.)

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Turning a cow hobby into a business

BY ELISE BROCHU
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Cool Cow Cheese co-owner Tom Blatchford's day starts with milking 20 cows. "We bought an old milk parlor from Purina Farms, so it's similar to the (one) I milked on when I was a kid, at my uncle's farm. Nothing too modern," Tom laughed, "You want to have something you can fix in a hurry, because there's nothing worse than having something break down and you've got cows that need to be milked."

After milking, he dusts both the bed and breakfast and the store, then sweeps and mops floors to make sure everything is perfect before guests arrive. "This is what it's like if you're, you know, doing it all. You've got to do it all," he said good-naturedly.

Tom said he always liked cows and knew he wanted to be a farmer, but starting a farm takes financial resources he didn't have at a young age. He worked in the healthcare industry instead, which moved them around the country. His wife, Martha, bought him his first cow while she was pregnant with



their son and on bed rest. "I think she really got me the cow to get me out of the house, to quit hovering around her," Tom laughed.

He named that first cow Morning Glory, because her mooing woke him up every morning. Morning Glory was apparently so particular about who milked her that anyone who helped out while Tom was out of town for work had to wear his overalls or she wouldn't give up the milk.

For their son, Ben, cows have been a part of life since the day he was born. Martha got sick shortly after, and, as Tom told it, "I have to milk the cow, (Martha's) sick, she

can't take care of (the baby), so I've got this picture of me with this two- or three-day old kid in my backpack, on my back, as I'm leaning over hand milking a cow." Ben now makes most of the cheese.

Tom once bought a cow online, by accident. "I was on the Jersey Association, and (it was) a really nice cow from a guy I knew," Tom said, "It came from a nice genetic line, so I just decided I'd bid on it to warm it up, then I had to explain to my wife that I bought a cow, and that we were driving from Memphis, Tenn. to Lexington, Ky. to pick up a cow."

Tom went on to explain that when they moved to Owensville and expanded their heard, they bought cows from California. The cows were shipped to Iowa, where they were removed from the trailer, milked, and put back on for the remainder of their journey. "So, about nine hours later, on a Sunday night, the cows showed up on this trailer, and lo and behold, after we unloaded and everything was fine, the next day, when we counted cows, there was an extra cow. So, coming up with a strange cow seems like a theme in my life," Tom laughed.

"I used to laugh about it because where we lived in Olive Branch, Miss., before we moved out here, and we lived in a horse community, you know, and they used to call me the 'cow whisperer' because everybody else was riding their horses around the community and I would put a halter on the cows and let them chew the grass down in the ditches and stuff," Tom said.

When they decided not to stay in Mississippi, cheese was the driving force behind what they were looking for. Because what

See **CHEESE** on Page 5

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Collection • from page 2

The antiques Luecke collects are usually rare.

"I have two buildings, one that is climate controlled," the enthusiast said. "I have quite a few people who come out and see them."

A devoted connoisseur of Oliver Farm Equipment Company and its agricultural machinery, Luecke's primary focus has been on those collectibles

"I mainly go for the rare ones that's very rare and have several different makes," Luecke said. "But Oliver is the main thing I collect. I grew up on them."

Unfortunately, he was never able to collect any of the pieces he had as a child, but he has several like them. As a devoted collector, Luecke doesn't limit himself to Oliver.

"I am across the board – the rarest I can find," he said. "I don't have none from when I was a kid, but I buy some just like them and restore them."

Restoring the machines is not his sole focus. Luecke enjoys sharing his admiration for the solid farm pieces by taking them to shows all over the country.

"I was in Florida last week for a show and Illinois last Saturday for a show," he said. "The shows I've been to are the Florida Flywheelers Antique Engines and the Oliver Winter Show in Greenville, Illinois, and all the antique tractor shows around Missouri."

He plans to attend the Missouri Valley Steam Engine Association Show in Boonville.

"We have a building there and are going to have a national show there in September, the weekend after Labor Day," Luecke said.

Last year, Luecke brought three of his rare tractors to

the Gasconade County Threshers Association Show in Rosebud, including a Cletrac Avery Crawler.

"It was a military Cletrac - used in World War II to move planes around with," Luecke said. "I restored it. I did it personally myself about a year ago. It's camouflage and is from 1941."

The other two tractors at the Thresher Show last year were an orange Avery Crawler and a Greel Oliver HG.

"I think the year was 1940," Luecke said about the Crawlers.

He has several favorites, such as the 770 Orchard, which is currently in Minnesota being restored. Only 10 were ever produced.

"People walk by and look at (the tractors) and (the show) has a parade area," Luecke said about the Thresher show. "They have tractor games and stuff that you can participate in. Another big show I go to is the State Fair on Ag Day — they feature antique tractors."

Other rare and favorite machines in his collection include a 2255 Oliver front wheel assist that was restored a couple of years ago.

"Not many were built and they were the last years of Oliver," Luecke said.

Oliver Farm Equipment closed its doors in 1976.

"My oldest tractor right now is a 1939 Oliver Hart-Parr that I just purchased in December," he said. "Not sure how many were made, but there are not many out there anymore. This is the only one I know of. I bought it restored."

The next in line to be restored is an Oliver 2655 — one of the biggest tractors they built.

"It is a pretty rare tractor, a '74 I think, and is the rarest one I have," he said.

Another long-time favorite and probably the most popular is the 1930s Thieman Hearse.

The Thieman Hearse is a tractor made into a Hearse," Luecke said. "The front end is a tractor with a seat on it and the back is a hearse with a casket inside. That one gets some of the most attention. It is the only one known to exist that I know of."

The previous owner of the Thieman Hearse was from Nebraska.

"I don't remember his name," Luecke said. "Supposedly he is in a nursing home and built it for him and his wife to have their last ride. Then they both got sick. I told the guy if something happens to them to let a family member know and reach out to me, I will bring it back up for them to have their last ride."

Luecke has made many friends and contacts in his pursuit of the four-wheeled machinery and hoped to make two more connections over the weekend.

"Saturday I (was) in Kansas to pick up a White 4180 tractor — probably around 1976-78 all original," he said. "It doesn't look pretty. I have another coming in a day from out of Pennsylvania — it has been restored. It's an Oliver OC-6 Crawler with a Ford flathead V-8 engine, which is not stock at all, but somebody put it in there and it's pretty cool."

Luecke thought the addition to his collection would fit well with his smallest tractor which isn't stock either. A lawnmower-sized pull tractor.

"It is called Little Ollie Miniature, a puller garden tractor with an alcohol engine," he said. "Jeff Adams' son Black Adams, who is 17 or 18, pulls garden tractors and is in Ohio this weekend — pulling it. He does win with it and he does pretty good."

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TOM AND BEN stand with Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a Jersey cow. Her heritage can be traced back to one of the first Jersey herds in the United States from the Biltmore Estates in North Carolina. This picture was taken just hours before she had her calf. Tom is holding his granddaughter Elizabeth as Ben holds Dorothy. **PHOTOS BY DENNIS WARDEN**

Cheese • from page 3

cows eat flavors the cheese, untouched native pasture was of primary importance, but they also wanted an old house near a small town. Tom said they were really lucky to settle in Owensville.

Martha found their farm online after a girls' weekend in Hermann. The property had been vacant for 20 years because the owner wanted it to be family farm instead of tilled up for row crops. "She found the property online on a Sunday, and I think we had called the real estate agent on that Sunday, made a deal, and by Wednesday the property was ours," Tom said. That was 2010, and they moved onto it in 2011.

Tom said the community has been very welcoming, even when skeptical about his plan to make cheese in wine country. "At the end of the day, we're extremely really lucky, because we've had so many people that have helped us along the line. This world out here, if you scratch underneath the surface, there's a lot of people who are trying some unique farming to make sure their family farms are going to still survive. There's traditional agriculture out here, but there's a lot of non-traditional agriculture, which really makes it fun for us," Tom said. He spoke of The Nutty Pig Farm, Homestead Farms Nursery, and SV Shrimp Farm. "They're all doing and making it happen, just like we were making it happen, which gave me courage the whole way through that we

were in the right location, and that we could get the support that we needed, and that the infrastructure was here," Tom said.

Artisan cheese production has a lot of the same characteristics as wine production, Tom said, in that the land is what makes the cheese special, and what makes Cool Cow Cheese unique to Owensville. The native plants and grasses cows eat affect their milk very much the way native soil and weather affect grapes used for wine. "There's eight steps. Variation of those eight steps and you get 3,000 different kinds of cheese, and then you can walk to a different farm, and because of the flavor of the milk, then that same 3,000 cheeses would all taste a little bit different," Tom explained.

Cheese, like wine, is about blending science with artistry. Cool Cow Cheese is considered a small-batch cheese maker, as they make cheese using 'only' 1,000 pounds of milk at a time. Their vat was imported from Amsterdam, because it provides precise temperature control, which allows them to keep the temperature consistent within one degree throughout the vat, which, in turn, allows for a more consistent product.

Gouda cultures are imported from Holland, so Cool Cow Cheese can make a more traditional 'farmer's Gouda', as opposed to American Gouda. Cows are artificially inseminated every few years with sexed semen from one of the top cheese merit bulls

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Cheese • from page 5

in the world, and those calves are kept to increase the herd.

Like winemakers taste their grapes, artisan cheese makers taste their milk every day, and the subtleties in flavor and texture determine what cheese to make from it. The milk changes every day, and every season, based on what the cows are eating, so the type of cheese produced changes throughout the year.

“We make a Havarti in the springtime, and we normally make Havarti when the dandelions are blooming, and as soon as the dandelions are gone, then Havarti production is over.

Just because that cheese is beautiful in color, mild in flavor, and it’s very creamy, and that’s when the cows are producing that kind of a milk,” Tom said, explaining that they prefer to keep their ingredients to a minimum, “So it’s our taste buds that really help us, because, believe me, we’d like to make the most profitable cheese over and over and over again, but those cows – you talk to them, and you encourage them – but they don’t always do it.” Sometimes that’s a happy accident.

Cool Cow’s garlic cheese was born when their cows got into a patch of onions, ate the tops, and ‘ruined’ a batch of milk. The Blatchfords decided to cover the flavor with garlic, and that became one of their most popular cheeses.

“Cheese curds is a green cheese, and that’s the only cheese that’s really edible right away, because the aging process is what makes cheese magical,” Tom said.

When they put in their cheese cave, the Blatchfords sourced local boards, then left it open to let natural yeasts and organisms populate before closing it off. “So now we have that local sourdough kind of yeast to help us with making our rinds. That’s all part and parcel of what I call, you know, a cheese maker bias. Having the native grass pasture is us saying that, as cheese makers, this is the bias that we’d like to build in.

When we reseeded some of our pasture, we put clover in, because clover will give the cheese a nutty flavor, and cows love clover, so we literally have a nutty flavor line all the way through all of our cheeses, so you can tell it’s our cheeses because there’s this little nutty note in every one of the cheeses,” Tom explained.

They also brine their cheeses instead of salting them. Because Jersey cows give really rich milk, the Blatchfords prefer to let the cheese and brine work together to determine how much salt is going into the cheese. “Most people think cheese is preserved through salt, but in actuality it’s the lactic acid from the cultures that preserve the cheese.

It’s the salt that helps you flavor the cheese, so we kind of let that happen on a

See **CHEESE** on Page 9



TOM (center, photo above) AND BEN BLATCHFORD bring in their Jersey cows Sunday evening to separate the pregnant cows who are ready to calve. **PHOTO BY DENNIS WARDEN**

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BEN BLATCHFORD (right) works with the cheese. His father, Tom, takes care of the Jersey cows that provide the milk for the cheese production.

PHOTO ABOVE BY DENNIS WARDEN,
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MU pesticide safety program vital to state's ag economy

COLUMBIA, Mo. – Sam Polly, coordinator of University of Missouri Extension's Pesticide Safety Education Program, wants to make Missouri a safer place that allows Missouri's agricultural economy to continue to grow.

Polly says the program is the backbone of agricultural and commercial pest management in Missouri. Agriculture, forestry and fisheries contribute \$369 million annually to the state's economy.

MU Extension and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency observe National Pesticide Safety Education Month in February to raise awareness for pesticide safety education and share best practices for using pesticides in and around the farm and home.

In 2023, Polly and his team taught more than 3,300 people at 130 private applicator training programs and 1,600 people at 35 commercial applicator trainings statewide.

Licensed commercial applicators must pass an exam and participate in continuing education courses on environmentally sound uses of pesticides. The Missouri Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Pesticide Control mandates commercial applicator training.

Polly's MU Extension team includes agronomists, agricultural engineers, horticulturists and specialists in natural resources. Daniel Sjarpe serves as assistant coordinator.

In 2023, the team developed, updated or supplemented 18 of the 21 pesticide training manuals needed for Missouri applicators to comply with new federal regulations. The team also created an online private applicator certification/recertification portal for on-demand training.

In addition to teaching pesticide safety to adults, Polly and his team also taught younger groups through 4-H and FFA.

Polly suggests reviewing these tips during National Pesticide Safety Education Month:

- Always read and follow the labels on pesticides.
- Store pesticides in their original containers with proper labels.
- Store pesticides out of the reach of children and pets.
- Use the amount specified on the label. Using more will not be more effective and may harm you, your loved ones and the environment.
- Wash hands with soap and water after



AGRONOMIST NICK Wesslak is part of a team of MU Extension specialists that presents pesticide safety training to adults and youths in Missouri. In 2023, the team, headed by Sam Polly, taught more than 3,300 people at 130 private applicator training programs and 1,600 people at 35 commercial applicator trainings statewide. Photo courtesy of Sam Polly.

using pesticides. Wash clothes that have been in contact with pesticides immediately and separately from other items.

- Don't let children and pets enter sprayed areas while they are still wet.

- Keep pesticides away from food and dishes.

To learn more, search for "pesticide safety" at <https://extension.missouri.edu> or visit <https://www.epa.gov/pesticides>.

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Cheese • from page 6

natural basis versus our own taste buds,” he said.

“Those are all cheese maker biases that are built in to make cheese unique, and that’s what is really fun. If you’re a cheese connoisseur, you’re going to have a good time tasting all these different kinds of cheeses, with all these cheesemakers and their biases that they built in. Exactly like wine tasting,” Tom said.

Tom said they try to produce cheeses that go with the other foods produced in this region. “We have some cheeses that are really great with wine, we have some cheeses that we built because of all the sausages that are made around here, and we have some cheeses that we built because of all the grass-based beef, and things like that,” he said. He feels that if everyone did that, the food produced in central Missouri would be totally different than what could be produced anywhere else, due to both the land and the German influence.

In addition to creating cheese that pairs well with other local foods, Cool Cow Cheese is creating cheeses that incorporate local wines and spirits, and partnering with other local producers to create foods that contain their cheese.

“We make what we call a ‘stained glass cheddar,’ where we take a local winemaker’s wine and add it to the cheddar, and then we age it with that,” Tom said, explaining that they’re using the Röbbler Vineyards wine that was mentioned in the wine bible, and also a chambourcin from Prairie Barn Winery in St. James.

In addition to that, they are experimenting with local whiskey/bourbon makers to add whiskey or bourbon to their

line of cheddars. “We’re trying to be a food that is local, in the sense of it’s produced because of the other foods that are produced in this area, and we have some great whiskey and bourbon makers,” he said.

Their efforts don’t stop there. They’re working with Bavarian Smoke Haus in New Melle to make a das kredder sausage that contains Cool Cow Cheese gouda, and they’ve added a red pepper cheese for people who like a little more spice.

In their store, they sell their own cheese, Martha’s handmade soaps, and other local products. Their full range of cheese can be purchased online at www.coolcowcheese.com, and you might find them in St. Louis specialty stores and at Tower Grove Farmer’s Market.

“We don’t have a lot of local customers and things like that, because that’s not probably the market we were after, but every time we have somebody local and they have family in town, the next thing you know, they show up at our doorstep and show off this thing that’s in Owensville. So I like that,” Tom said.

At the bed and breakfast, the Blatchfords have hosted guests from every state in the US, except Vermont, and from over 30 countries. “If you think about all of those folks, from all these different countries, that come out in the middle of nowhere on the gravel road, it’s amazing,” he said adding that locals might forget how beautiful central Missouri is because they’re lucky enough to live here and see it every day, but people from other places are amazed by it.

The Blatchfords’ guests are treated to a breakfast that includes products from the farm and other locally sourced foods. They can help with farm chores if they want (and

Tom says they usually do), and Tom will even teach them to make mozzarella if they want to learn. For dinner, Tom and Martha refer guests to local restaurants, including over 1,000 referrals to White Mule Winery’s steak dinners. The Blatchford family is planning to add more specialty weekends for B&B guests, in conjunction with events at other local business, to provide a cohesive regional experience for their guests.

Tom believes niche markets are key for the survival of family farms, but also diversifying within niche markets to use every available resource, including potential waste products. “I think that’s the old farmer way.

The farmers looked at what assets they had on their property, and if their land would grow vegetables, they would be a truck farmer. If their land would grow fruit, they were a fruit farmer. They had a different philosophy. They didn’t ram everybody into row crop business. They looked at their terra firma and said ‘this is what the property that I can afford, have, whatever it is, and this is what I can accomplish with it,’ he said.

This year, they plan to add a sunflower maze, both to draw customers to the farm and because his daughter-in-law loves sunflowers. They’re also working toward adding something for Ben’s daughters, so their family farm includes something each member of the family enjoys, as well as another venture he’s not quite ready to go public with yet, because “if we haven’t got it perfected, we don’t introduce it.”

“I took a cow hobby and am busy making it into a business,” Tom said, “and we’re not done, by a long shot.”



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Black vultures continued threat to Missouri cattle

BY COLIN WILLARD
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VIENNA — Farmers from around the region convened in the Knights of Columbus Hall in Vienna last Friday for the Central Missouri Forage and Beef Conference.

The annual event features dinner, trade show booths and guest speakers on a variety of agricultural topics. This year's conference included discussions on black vultures, farm succession planning, market outlooks, options for year-end grazing and common feed comparisons.

Jonny Fox, an assistant district supervisor (Southeast Missouri) with the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services (APHIS), gave a presentation about black vultures and the threat they pose to livestock. He said that this time of year black vultures pose the most threat because of calving.

APHIS's primary responsibility is dealing with animal damage management. Last year, the agency began working with the Missouri Department of Conservation, the Missouri Cattlemen's Association and the Missouri Farm Bureau to curb the effects of Missouri's expanding black vulture population.

"We wanted to put tools in the hands of agricultural producers to be able to proactively manage their herds and not experience livestock loss," Fox said.

Two types of vultures live in Missouri. Turkey vultures are longtime residents of the state, at least in the summer months. Some of the features that distinguish them from



similar species are their bright red heads, wings that appear black with a silvery bottom half and V-shaped wings during flight. Turkey vultures often hunt primarily by smell though they also use sight. They are scavengers who feed on carrion such as roadkill.

Black vultures used to only appear in the southernmost part of Missouri, but over the last several years, they have become more common farther north. Unlike turkey vultures, their heads are black. Their wings also appear black from below, but they have white patches near the outer edges. During flight, black vultures tend to flap their wings more often and keep more of a horizontal wing shape. They also tend to fly higher than turkey vultures because they do not rely on smell to find food. Instead, they use sight and often follow turkey vultures to carcasses.

Fox said the number of black vulture sightings in Missouri started to pick up around 2018. Reports of livestock

losses soon followed. Fox cited a pattern of warmer winters as a reason for the black vultures' migration into the state. APHIS has confirmed black vulture sightings as far north as Columbia and heard unconfirmed reports as far north as Macon.

"They're becoming more of a problem just because we're seeing more of them on the landscape," he said. "They're just going to keep on moving north."

Black vultures can cause different types of damage to property, but the main focus of the presentation was livestock damage. The greatest risk to calves comes during the period from birth until when the animal is about two weeks old. They perceive newborn cattle as carrion, which causes them to attack and peck at the eyes of calves until they die from a combination of stress and blood loss. Sometimes, the birds strike as early as birth by landing on the mother's back as the calf is born. If the mother is able to defend the calf from one bird, more usually follow the initial attack.

"They're pretty aggressive creatures," Fox said.

When agents investigate a calf's death to see if a black vulture killed it, they usually begin by looking at the amount of blood on the scene. Without much blood, cattle deaths are rarely vulture kills. Black vultures still scavenge the eyes first from stillborn calves, so if the scene is not as bloody it is because the calf was dead when the vulture started eating it.

"After the eyes are removed, (the calf) goes to shaking its head and it flings blood everywhere," Fox said. "There'll be

See **VULTURES** on Page 11

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Vultures • from page 10

blood on the ground and it'll look basically like a Hollywood murder scene.”

Although black vultures do act as predators toward new calves, attacking live animals is not their preferred way of finding food.

“They still prefer to eat carrion because they don't have to work for it,” Fox said. “But black vultures are very visual hunters versus turkey vultures, which hunt by sense of smell. A calf lying there in a field looks to them to be dead.”

Black vultures also cause damage to vehicles. Fox said he knew of cases where the birds had shredded boat and lawn mower seats or pecked rubber seals out of vehicles or doors. They also peck at shingles on buildings.

Fox said people living near cell phone towers may have a higher chance of noticing black vulture presence in their area because the birds like to roost on the towers. They do not often do the same for radio towers. They may also roost on playgrounds.

If anyone notices black vultures roosting near their home or cattle, they can use several methods of harassment to scare away the birds. Options include paintballs, laser pointers, a variety of noisemakers or pyrotechnics such as bottle rockets. Property owners can prevent roosting by removing dead trees, which are the favorite hunting spots of the birds. Removing dead animals from a pasture as quickly as possible also helps to avoid attracting vultures.

“If there's a food source, they're really adamant about sticking with it,” Fox said.

Fox said effigies are among the most effective deterrents for black vultures because they can stay in a place all the time. APHIS is able to provide effigies to people in need. In addition to using dead vultures, artificial effigies and instructions on how to make them are available on the internet.

USDA has a permit program in place for landowners who want to use lethal control on black vultures. Permits last for a year and allow holders to kill up to five black vultures.

“Typically, if you're integrating harassment with lethal control, that's about one of the most effective means we have to discourage them,” Fox said.

He recommended that anyone using lethal force combine it with a non-lethal harassment method so the birds associate it with death. For example, someone could fire a bottle rocket at the vultures before killing one with a shotgun.

Black vulture permit applications are available at Farm Bureau locations.

“There's no reason that you should get a ticket because you are protecting your livestock,” Fox said. “That's why we have these permits available free of charge.”

The presentation also included a mention of the USDA's Livestock Indemnity Program, which helps farmers recoup funds after a herd loss of at least 5 percent. The

program covers a variety of damages not limited to vulture kills. More information is available under the “Programs & Services” tab of the USDA website at fsa.usda.gov.

Although black vultures pose a threat to livestock, Fox reminded the audience that they serve an environmental purpose as scavengers of dead animals.

“I don't want to make it sound completely doom and gloom,” he said. “These birds do have an important job in the environment. They just also have some bad habits.”



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Beautiful eggs, beautiful chickens

BY ELISE BROCHU
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Dee and Dave Luker worked for years to be able to afford their dream of “retiring” on a farm. They closed on their farm, roughly halfway between Linn and Chamois, on Dave’s birthday in 1996. Dee continued to teach, and eventually retired as an elementary school principal, and Dave quit his job to become a cattle farmer.

“During the COVID thing, we sold a ton of beef off the farm. And people were panicking for it. I felt bad for them. Most of it was ground beef, and hard to get slaughter dates. We had raised chickens for a number of years, and when we went in and started looking at buying baby chicks again, I was shocked at how much they cost. You know, \$5 for a broiler that you’re going to raise up and try and process yourself and sell and recoup your investment, and your time, it wouldn’t pencil out. So, I told Dee, I said, ‘Hey, why don’t we take a look at getting us a small commercial incubator. Let’s just raise our own chickens,’” Dave said.

They ordered the incubators in spring of 2023, then started looking at which breeds they wanted and which were available, eventually choosing Turkeys and Delewares (to cross), American Bresse (touted as ‘the world’s most delicious chicken’) from a breeder in Mississippi, as well as a variety of egg-layers that would provide both the genetics and egg colors Dee wanted. “We bought some really nice introductory level commercial incubators. And with all our incubators running at the same time, we can set about 800



eggs at a time,” Dave said.

“We haven’t done that yet,” Dee was quick to point out.

“No, we haven’t done that yet because we’re taking our baby steps. There’s one thing we know about chickens—you either sell them or smell them,” Dave joked.

“We’re setting close to 250,” Dee added, trying to steer the conversation back to the subject at hand.

“It’s taken us a year to get our breeding stock to a point where we actually have some egg production now. And it just made sense that if we’re going to do this for ourselves, we might as well just offer it to the public. To people that like to have a few chickens, have them local, great, you know, reach out, tell us what you want, what type of breed you’re looking for. If we have it, we’ll set them for you,”

Dave explained.

Dave and Dee sell eggs to a health food store in St. Louis, along with beef, and Dee goes to farmers markets and swap shops. “We have some series egg production here, and we can’t compete with the local grocery store. I can’t sell a dozen eggs for \$3,” Dave said.

“Not the way we raise them,” Dee added.

“We have seven pure breeds, and then we do a multicolor mix. I have a house where, if I have a real pretty rooster or something that is a special egg color, you put them together. And it’s fascinating to watch as you combine the different colors,” Dee said, adding that colored eggs are also just fun.

“I started off with the Marans,” Dee said, “I just got one off Craigslist, (and) had no idea what I was getting. I got four and ended up with three roosters, but I did get one hen and I kept one rooster. Then, when they laid these beautiful eggs, I said I was hooked. They’re my favorites.” She then expanded to add breeds with different colors of eggs.

“We only go with purebreds, so you know what you’re going to get. If you go with an Easter-eager or and olive-egger or something, you don’t know what you’re going to get. I was looking for consistency, where I could sell them to people and they would know what they were going to get, each and every day,” Dee said. She’s fascinated by how breeds can be crossed to get different colors of eggs, and pointed out that people are now breeding for grey, purple, and pink eggs, although she has not gotten to that point yet.

See **HATCHERY** on Page 15



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PHOTOS BY ELISE BROCHU



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COLUMBIA, Mo. — Managing a pond or lake for sport fishing takes time, resources and a year-round commitment. Timing is crucial for many pond and lake management practices.

The approaching spring is an ideal time in Missouri to evaluate and determine if ponds need to be stocked or restocked, said Robert Pierce, associate extension professor in fisheries and wildlife at the University of Missouri.

Pierce said proper planning can increase the likelihood of good fishing opportunities and a healthy pond that meets management objectives.

Missouri pond owners should take three key steps when preparing to stock or restock ponds with fish this spring.

1. Determine your management objectives and assess the environmental conditions of the pond.

Will your desired fish population thrive? It depends on the size, structure and age of the pond. Shallow ponds are prone to fish kills caused by low oxygen, especially during winter and summer, and muddy ponds can lead to stunted fish growth. In addition, it's important to consider water quality, food

availability and vegetation control before purchasing fish for stocking.

The Missouri Department of Conservation's Missouri Pond Handbook offers helpful tips for estimating pond size, and MU Extension's Pond Management Calendar, at extension.missouri.edu/g9418, has information to help time various management practices and stocking regimes.

2. Stock the appropriate fish species.

MU Extension's guide for managing ponds and lakes, at extension.missouri.edu/g9475, provides detailed recommendations on stocking fish in Missouri ponds and lakes. Additionally, the Missouri Department of Conservation offers recommendations on stocking the appropriate combination of fish species and sizes for a balanced population within your pond. For older ponds, this means taking inventory of the present fish population and their condition; owners of newly constructed ponds should be thoughtful when stocking for the first time.

Pond owners have several species to select from:

Largemouth bass work well in stocked ponds. They are a predatory fish and eat small fish, frogs, crawfish and insects. Because of



STOCKING THE correct numbers of largemouth bass (pictured) and bluegill sunfish in ponds larger than an acre will help ensure a balanced fishery and provide excellent angling opportunities for years.

their willingness to fight, they create a sport fishing challenge.

Bluegill sunfish are popular for catching and cooking. They consume microscopic plants, insects, snails, crayfish and small fish. Largemouth bass will eat bluegill, but natural reproduction tends to sustain bluegill populations. Bluegill and largemouth bass provide the basis for a sustainable fishery in Missouri ponds. Stocking rates depend on the productivity of the pond, but, generally, stock at a ratio of 500 bluegill to 100 largemouth bass per acre. Although bluegill

can be stocked in ponds during spring or fall, it is often preferable to stock smaller fingerlings in fall so they have a chance to grow before you stock largemouth bass the following spring.

Redear sunfish and bluegill sunfish can be included in the stocking as they eat snails, and their young can be part of largemouth bass diets.

Fathead minnows can be stocked at 3 pounds per acre to provide an additional

See **POND** on Page 15

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Pond • from page 14

source of forage.

Channel catfish are part of largemouth bass diets, so frequent restocking (every two to three years) is necessary. Catfish consume crayfish, fish or commercial feed. Although catfish are not necessary to balance bass and bluegill populations in your pond, they provide additional fishing opportunities. Catfish can spawn in most ponds, but 8- to 10-inch fingerlings need to be restocked yearly in ponds with balanced bass and bluegill populations, as bass quickly consume smaller fingerlings.

Grass carp are an option for ponds in need of vegetation control. However, they are prolific and can overeat, causing environmental concerns.

3. Support Missouri's aquaculture industry

As owners take inventory of their pond's ecosystem and determine the appropriate species for stocking, MU Extension's Ryan Milhollin encourages them to consider supporting the state's growing sport fish industry. Milhollin and a team of professionals studied Missouri's aquaculture industry and developed resources, including demand opportunities and business models, for those interested in an aquaculture enterprise. Visit <http://muext.us/Aquaculture.Links>.

"Our marketing study found that a large portion of the state's aquaculture producers focus on pond and sport fish stocking, and many sell directly to consumers," said Milhollin. "Working with a local fish producer can be a win-win for the industry and local pond owners."

In 2020, the MDC published a list of Missouri fish producers who raise species suitable for the state's ponds.

Missouri pond owners are encouraged to greet spring with a plan for stocking or restocking their ponds. For additional information about aquaculture and fisheries in the Show-Me State, reach out to the MU Extension aquaculture and fisheries team or Lincoln University's aquaculture program.

University of Missouri Extension offers producers a range of decision-making tools and workshops to support farm business management and agricultural landowner decisions. Learn more at www.muext.us/AgBusiness, and find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/AgBusinessMU.

Hatchery • from page 12

Happy Farm Life Hatchery currently offers purebred Black Copper Marans, Silverdudd Blues, American Bresse,

Delaware Broilers, Turkeys, Americanaunas, and Ermine Americanaunas, as well as Easter-eggers and olive-eggers, as both hatching eggs and chicks. The next breed Dee hopes to add are Welsummers, which are known for their speckled eggs. "I'm

getting top-notch stock, so that not only do you have beautiful eggs, you have beautiful chickens," Dee said. Her goal is to stay as close to the standard of perfection for each breed as possible. It was for that reason she drove to Georgia last year to pick up Black Copper Marans from the number one show line in America, so Black Copper Maran eggs and chicks from show stock are also available.

Dee is planning to get her flock NPIP (National Poultry Improvement Plan) certified this year. "They come out and do a blood test on every one of your chickens. All 120 of them. So, they will do that and certify your flock pollorum-free, which is a disease they have had out of the United

States and are trying to keep it out," Dee said. That certification will allow Dee to ship both hatching eggs and live chicks out of state.

"First, I need to make sure that people are going to be happy with the product, and then that it can be reproduced," Dee said, adding that the process takes time, "You have to wait about six months to see what that chickens gonna lay. You have to remember, when you buy chicks, 50 percent of them are going to be males."

"That's where the old saying comes from – you can't count your chicks before they hatch," Dave laughed.

"Like Dave said, we're doing we're doing the turkeys and the Delaware's. We're doing them separately; we're doing them together. We're trying to produce a reproducible meat bird that we don't have to spend \$5 apiece for. So, we're homesteading, basically. We are a homestead. And so we are trying to produce just about everything that we need," Dee said, "And it's fun."

"If you enjoy it, it's not work," Dave concluded.



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New MU study examines variability of water, carbon in Missouri agriculture ecosystems, future impact on crops

BY COURTNEY PERRETT

One of the main reasons plants use water is to allow them to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. This means that, in plants, the water and carbon cycles are tightly linked. In a new study, researchers from the University of Missouri and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) used this foundational principle to identify sustainable farming practices aimed at helping staple crops like corn and soybeans thrive during extreme weather conditions that have become more common in the Midwest.

This study examined how farming practices affect crop resilience to climate change by examining water and carbon fluxes in three contrasting ecosystems: A business-as-usual tilled cropping system, an aspirational no-till cropping system with cover crops, and a native tallgrass prairie ecosystem.

This aspirational plot, covered by a soybean crop, houses its own eddy covariance “flux tower” device. Photo by Jeffrey Wood

“One of the big goals is what we call climate-smart agriculture, which can mean using crops to absorb carbon out of the air, but it also means trying to adopt farming practices that help farms adapt to the changing climate,” USDA research hydrologist Adam Schreiner-McGraw said. “As it gets hotter, plants get more stressed, and that means

they often have lower yields. This research is focused on understanding adaptation and how to work toward more resilient agro-ecosystems.”

A comparison of rates of evapotranspiration — when water transfers from the land to the atmosphere— and carbon dioxide exchange revealed interesting patterns among ecosystems. In an analysis of data collected over the past four-year cycle, the native prairie ecosystem had higher rates of evapotranspiration than the tilled cropping system. In comparison, however, the prairie’s rate of evapotranspiration didn’t differ much from that of the no-till cropping system. Further, both cropping systems had higher amounts of plant growth (i.e., carbon uptake) than the native prairie.

From these findings, the tilled cropping site appears the most sensitive to environmental changes compared to the native prairie, which is most resilient to extreme weather, Schreiner-McGraw, who works in the USDA’s Cropping Systems and Water Quality Research Unit on MU’s campus, said. Moreover, because the no-till system has the most crop diversity, including corn, soybeans, wheat, and hay, it had the most variable rates of evapotranspiration. This phenomenon Schreiner-McGraw attributes to agricultural management strategies.

Understanding variable rates of evapotranspiration help scientists weigh if the ‘planned’ management has a bigger

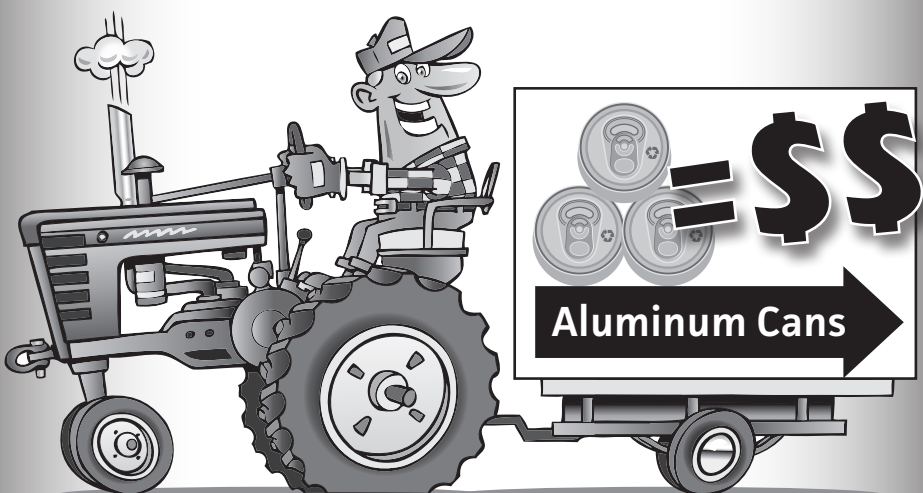
impact on the water and carbon budgets than the ‘unplanned’ weather variability, which can help with predictions for crop water and carbon uptake as extreme weather gets worse.

Another way to build environmental resistance is to plant a diversified rotation of crops over the long term, said Jeffrey Wood, an assistant professor in the MU School of Natural Resources. As climate fluctuations intensify — for Missouri, that’s warmer, wetter winters and drier summers with less frequent rain — understanding how best to support crop adaptation and which crops to plant at what times of the year has become increasingly necessary.

“The type of work we do lends itself to collaboration because we all share data in a community-based network,” Wood said, “People are always willing to share ideas, which makes it easy to work together and contribute to research that expands in scope from the problems one researcher might be working on locally to those another might face on a bigger scale.”

“Agriculture accentuates interannual variability in water fluxes but not carbon fluxes, relative to native prairie, in the U.S. Corn Belt” was published in Agriculture and Forest Meteorology. Co-authors include Megan E. Metz, John Sadler and Kenneth Sudduth. This research is a contribution from the Long-Term Agroecosystem Research (LTAR) network, which is supported by the USDA.

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AN EDDY covariance tower, a tool which measures the breathing capacity of an ecosystem, sits in Tucker Prairie, Missouri's largest remaining virgin tall-grass prairie. Photo by Jeffery Wood

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Feedstuff Finder: One-stop shop for Missouri buyers and sellers

COLUMBIA, Mo. – Farmers and ranchers have a new tool to find or list hay and co-product feedstuffs for sale: Feedstuff Finder, developed by University of Missouri Extension for individuals looking to buy or sell products.

As drought and transportation issues make finding quality feed ingredients difficult, helps livestock producers and feed producers find each other easily. Sourcing and pricing alternative feed sources is made more intuitive with the website’s mapping tool, said Wesley Tucker, MU Extension agricultural business specialist.

Sellers of co-products like soyhulls, distillers grains or corn gluten feed, as well as forages like corn silage or hay, can share prices, product information and locations with potential buyers

at no cost, he said. Buyers can view available products on an easy-to-navigate map, complete with product details and a delivery cost estimator. Feedstuff listings are free and can be sorted by forage or co-product type and price per unit.

“We hope to see Feedstuff Finder become the go-to platform for suppliers and livestock producers in Missouri,” Tucker said. “This is a one-of-a-kind tool that can better connect the industry and make sourcing local feed products easier. This winter, many Missouri cattle producers are going to be searching for feed. A lot of hay and other feed ingredients are going to be hauled into and around Missouri. Feedstuff Finder can make the job of keeping livestock fed easier.”

Feed is the most significant cost for many livestock produc-

ers, and major market risks exist as a variety of factors can affect the availability, cost and quality of feedstuff products. As MU Extension works to double the value of Missouri agriculture, assisting the state’s farmers and ranchers in mitigating risk is of particular importance, Tucker said.

“Feedstuff Finder has been developed to make farmers’ lives simpler,” said MU Extension agricultural economist Ryan Milhollin. “The platform helps producers and consumers of feedstuffs geographically find each other, cut transportation costs and manage tight winter feed supplies when feed costs and availability can be volatile.”

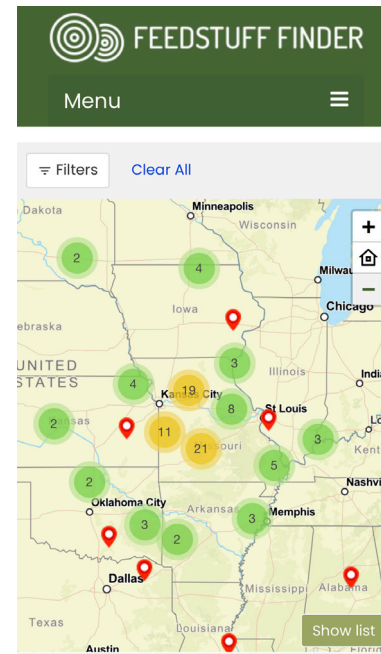
MU Extension is collaborating with the Missouri Department of Agriculture and the MU Agricultural Electronic Bulletin Board to populate directories and

help users become familiar with Feedstuff Finder. Instructional videos, in-person training and other resources will be available to assist new users.

Visit <https://feedstufffinder.org> to view feedstuff product listings; individuals can create a free account to post products for sale.

University of Missouri Extension offers producers a range of decision-making tools and workshops to support farm business management and agricultural landowner decisions. Learn more at www.muext.us/AgBusiness, and find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/AgBusinessMU.

Funding for this project was provided by the North Central Extension Risk Management Education Center and the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture under Award Number 2021-70027-34694.



SCREENSHOT FROM Feedstuff Finder website.

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Raising cattle in drought conditions

BY RALPH VOSS
OSAGE COUNTY CATTLE RANCHER

The summers and falls of 2022 and 2023 were very dry across most of the state of Missouri.

In 2023, a four-county area that took in Miller County to our southwest and included Eldon and the Lake of the Ozarks was beyond dry. That area was one of the driest in the country. Montgomery County to our northeast was also severely dry. Many places in the state got 10 to 15 inches of rain in late July and early August. Miller County and Montgomery County got nothing like that.

In Osage county in the past two years, many places received much more rainfall than others. It's fair to say that rainfall in the county was spotty.

Barely two months into 2024, we appear to be headed into our third dry year in a row. What's a person to do?

I don't have all the answers, but I do have a few. We need to look at the way the best in the business go about racking up their achievements. I've always found that trying to do things the way the best operators work is going to bring you considerable success.

Hay & Forage Grower magazine last year published a story about some friends of ours from Hartville, Mo., Steve and Judy Freeman. Mike Rankin, the man who wrote the story, described the Freemans as "owning and operating one of the most highly regarded grazing operations in the United States." That is not hyperbole. The Freemans have earned that reputation.

Our thanks to the folks at the magazine for letting us run the article in this special section. Turn to Page 38 for the story.

As you read through the article, be sure to note that the Freemans use rotational grazing, moving their animals frequently, usually daily. Other practices they follow include frost-seeding legumes, keeping their cattle numbers in sync with their grass so they feed relatively little hay, which they purchase, rather than produce.

We all know how dry it was this past year. With these kinds of growing conditions, the Freemans will make it through this winter with feeding hay for only one month.

The Freemans have some native grasses, but for the most part their pastures consist of fescue and other grasses that have developed because of their grazing practices. They are witnessing a change in their pastures, as the frequent movement of the cattle are allowing other grasses to come on. This diversity

of grass is beneficial to the grass, the cattle and the soil.

It's important to note that the Freemans are seeing spectacular results without the use of commercial fertilizer.

One of the biggest mistakes I've made in the cattle business is to not make more use of native grasses. The Freemans are not making this mistake. They have some natives now and will be planting 180 acres of native grasses over the next three years, at 60 acres per year. The first 60-acre tract has already been planted.

It's important to have people like the Freemans that have demonstrated the benefits of good grazing practices. Here in Missouri we have another resource to learn from. Hamilton Native Outpost at Elk Creek (near Houston, Mo.) is one of the premier producers of native grass seed in the country. They will be holding field days this year. If you want to see magnificent stands of native grasses and learn how to develop native grasses, go to one of these field days.

In 2016 I planted 15 acres of native grasses – Big Blue Stem, Switchgrass, Indiangrass and several others. Twelve of those acres are looking good, while three are almost a total failure. The native grasses I planted are almost all warm season grass. This means they do the bulk of their growing from spring through late summer. I should have incorporated cool-season natives as well. This would have given me several more months of forage. But more importantly, this would have meant that our fields with both warm- and cool-season natives would benefit from roots that are alive and functioning almost all year long, thereby bringing soil-improving, biological activity to our soils.

Last year I planted between 30 and 40 acres of Switchgrass and Gamagrass in one of our river bottom fields. In August, the Switchgrass was looking good, according to Gatlin Bunton, Missouri's foremost grass guru who runs the Wurdack Farm for the University of Missouri. Hopefully the dry weather that extended well into the fall did not cause significant damage to the baby Switchgrass plants. I'm told that once Switch germinates, it can withstand very dry weather. I'm hoping that's the case.

Regardless of your age, you need to consider planting natives. If you are 30 years old, you are foolish if you don't plant natives. You've got decades ahead of you to benefit from a wise decision. If you are

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60 years old, you are still foolish if you don't go with natives – possibly not as foolish as the 30-year-old, but still foolish. Come to think about it, maybe the 60-year-old is more foolish than the 30-year-old. If the 30-year-old waits 10 years, he's still got up to 40 years to benefit from his decision. If the 60-year-old waits 10 years, he may be able to graze the good stuff for a decade, but probably not much more than that.

Ten years ago, in this special farm section, I wrote a story about The Land Institute (TLI), a non-profit organization in Salina, Kan., that is working to develop perennial grain, legumes and oilseed crops. If TLI realizes its goal of turning a host of annual plants into perennials, that organization will have revolutionized agriculture. Seventy percent of the grain in the world is produced by annual crops, which means that these crops see more tillage and more chemicals than if they were perennials.

For years farmers around the world have been burning through their soils with harmful tillage and toxic chemicals. Farmers in this country have done their fair share of damage, but nothing like China, Russia and India. Vast swaths of those nations are no longer capable of growing crops because they have been converted into deserts or have been contaminated with toxic chemicals or heavy metals or both.

Google "Cancer train" and read about the cancer problem in India that is caused by the use of toxic chemicals. This is not a story from decades ago. It's an ongoing story. There



are similar stories out there about other nations that have contaminated their soils. China may be worse than India. Five years ago our media reported stories about how Chinese farmers were literally destroying their soils by using toxic discharge from industrial plants to irrigate their crops. With the present regime in Washington, we no longer report stories like that because we no longer speak ill of China, even when they try to kill us with viruses.

If TLI can succeed in converting an annual plant into a perennial, it will have taken a giant step toward improving the lot of people around the world. How successful has TLI been to date? TLI's most well-known accomplishment is a

grain called Kernza, which is a wheat-like grain developed from wheatgrass. Kernza has been around for a number of years and is being used to make bread and beer, as well as other products, but will require a lot of work before it offers a realistic alternative to annual wheat. However, the TLI folks think it can be done. Currently, TLI anticipates that by 2040 Kernza will yield 75 percent of what annual wheat produces in Kansas.

A major impact has already arrived on the scene, although it appears this accomplishment is not as well known as Kernza. According to a TLI spokesperson, TLI has developed perennial rice with yields that are "on par with conventional rice varieties grown in Southeast Asia."

My interest in TLI's work is focused primarily on what it will do for livestock forage production. While TLI is mostly interested in producing grain for human consumption, it does see what it calls "dual-use" possibilities for both grain and forage. One such dual-use situation is Kernza grown with alfalfa. It has also been noted that Kernza alone can be a great forage.

Ten years ago when I first wrote about perennial grains, I was given the name of a Salina-area farmer who had grown Kernza for TLI. His name was Charlie Melander and he told me how he had planted Kernza seed provided by TLI and explained that after harvesting the grain, which went to TLI, he then baled the stubble and subsequently grazed

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the regrowth. He was very pleased with the quality of the hay and the forage.

Kernza potentially offers livestock producers a fabulous forage. On page XXXX is shown a man holding a Kernza plant with an obscenely huge root system. This plant would furnish nutritious forage for livestock, while helping build soil, improving water infiltration and being drought tolerant. Combine this plant with whatever other plants TLI can turn into perennials (for example: sorghum, soybeans, sunflowers and alfalfa), and we've got super forage.

I asked Tammy Kimbler, the chief information officer for TLI, what the institute needs to reach its goals. "For new perennial grains to succeed," she responded, "we need substantial investment from philanthropic, government, and private sectors in plant breeding, crop production, and early supply chain development today. With proper funding, perennial grains with high yields comparable to annual grain analogs can develop relatively quickly while retaining robust ecological co-benefits. Researchers in Yunnan, China, achieved high-yielding perennial rice in just 20 years, with support from The Land Institute and significantly less funding than is spent on annual incremental commodity grain yield improvements."

Another way to address dry weather is cover crops. By combining a number of grasses into one planting, the diversity of seeds makes the mixture survive dry weather much better than one grass alone.

In 2014 I explained in this special farm edition what was being planted in North Dakota. There in the Burleigh County Soil District three test plots were put in side-by-side. In one plot Oilseed Radish, Purple Top Turnip, Pasja Turnip, Soybean, Cowpea and Lupin (a legume) were mixed and planted together. In the second plot a monoculture of Oilseed Radish was planted, while in the third plot, another monoculture was planted, one variety of turnips. From the time of planting in May, until July 31, one inch of rain fell on those plots. The two monocultures

burned up, producing nothing. The diverse mixture of one radish, two turnips and three legumes thrived, growing to a height of 18 to 24 inches.

I've tried the multi-seed mix on at least two occasions – both in the fall – and both times hot, dry weather kept the seed from germinating in a timely manner. When moisture came later in the winter, I ended up with a great crop in the spring. I don't recall what year I planted the first crop, but the river flooded it before I had a chance to graze it. The second crop was planted in the fall of 2021, but didn't come on until 2022. We got about a week of grazing out of that field before we had to move the cows out because the Gasconade was on a rampage.

Why do I put cover crops in the bottoms? The answer is reasonable, in my opinion. The stand of grass in our bottoms leaves a lot to be desired. It's a rare year that the Gasconade doesn't get over our bottoms at least twice. These floods damage the grass and also require us to stay off that ground for an extended period of time. Even in 2023, with rain in short supply, the river came on twice in the first part of the year. Fortunately, Johnsongrass and Reed Canarygrass came on strong last year and this helped tremendously. Without those two grasses, last year would have been horrible. We've reduced our cow numbers significantly to bring the size of our herd in line with the available grass.

The river not only damages our stand of grass, but it makes us put too grazing pressure on our hills. As I mentioned above, in one of our bottom fields we hope to have 30-40 acres of Switchgrass to graze later this year when the weather warms up. That should help a great deal.

In the next few weeks, I intend to plant a spring cover crop on some of our hills. This planting will consist of two types of ryegrass, non-toxic fescue, timothy, red clover and lespedeza. If this crop thrives, 2024 should prove to be more pleasant than the two preceding years.

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A unique road to beef-grazing success

BY MIKE RANKIN
HAY & FORAGE GROWER

The South Poll cows were red and slick. At their side—an equal number of 1-month-old or younger calves already grazing on spring fescue in a Savannah-like setting. Their owners and caretakers, Steve and Judy Freeman, both admired and surveyed the herd while perched on their respective utility vehicles. Had the late Grant Wood been there, he would have broken out his paint brushes for an updated American Gothic.

Steve and Judy Freeman were city kids by any definition. The former was raised in Long Beach, Calif., while the latter grew up in Los Angeles. Each had some animal lovers in their ancestral bloodlines, and both matured with a desire to be around animals. So, how did two free-spirited West Coast youngsters end up in Hartville, Mo., owning and operating one of the most highly regarded grazing operations in the United States? Read on.

The couple met in San Diego, where Judy was the manager of a thoroughbred racehorse ranch and Steve was an employee. “I considered a good date as going to the bookstore,” Steve said. “It was there that we started reading about — and became interested in — homesteading.”

Soon after, with no planned destination and some saved dollars, they left California in a 1-ton van with two 80-pound dogs as passengers. They meandered around the country for close to a year, living in the van. At one point, a friend told them about the Ozark Mountains, and it sounded like an area that would meet their minimalist needs. Eventually, that’s where they headed and arrived in the area’s rolling hills in 1978. They were married during that same year.

“We knew Judy could always get a job with horses, and her employer would have to hire me because I was a part of the package,” Steve chuckled. “We ended up in Springfield, Mo., where Judy was hired at a purebred Arabian ranch while we remained living in our van.”

Eventually, the Freemans bought a small 86-acre property near where they reside and farm today, about 50 miles east of Springfield. They started a Grade C goat dairy where Judy milked 30 goats by hand and trained border collies while her husband worked on a neighboring beef farm.

Steve explained, “We were good with numbers and knew we could make it work. Our plan was to pay it off in a year. Then, about six months in, our milk processor put a quota on us and cut our price in half. That’s when we started raising some calves to supplement our income.”

While working on a beef farm and catching cattle for people with dogs that

they had trained, Steve got really interested in grass and farming. “My employer was a great mentor who taught me a lot,” he said.

Steve also took a part-time job as a milk tester, thinking that he could learn about dairying, which might provide the couple’s ticket to independence. What he determined was that if there was a way — other than dairying — to make a living by farming, they should pursue it. “The early 1980s was not a time that inspired you to want to get into dairy farming,” he said.

Although the farm economy was in shambles, the young couple had saved money from an inheritance and figured it was a good time to buy a farm because land values had crashed. That was the beginning of their foray into the beef business. They sold their 86 acres in 1987 and bought the 468-acre farm they now own and operate, expanding it to 900 grazeable acres. “That first year, we bought cow-calf pairs in March — the bottom of the market — and sold steers early the next year for what we paid for the pair,” Judy recalled. “Our timing was just blind luck,” Steve added.

The Freemans currently have 180 brood cows, breed 60 to 80 home-raised yearling heifers, and also purchase stockers to graze with the heifers. “If we have a drought year, we don’t want to be put in a position of selling our breeding stock,” Steve said. “So, we like to keep a cushion and protect ourselves. However, we also want to utilize our grass during the good times. That’s where the stockers come into play, and it’s worked really well. We can sell those stockers in a week if we have to,” he added.

TRIALS AND ERRORS

Steve noted that there’s been a lot of experimentation to match the right number of animals to acres. “When you’re dealing with biology, that sweet spot is a moving target. But you’ve got to learn how to keep the canoe afloat and not drown in those dry years. Right now, we’re at about 3 animal units per grazeable acre. We’ve been under 2 animal units per acre, but that required feeding a lot more hay.”

The Freemans stopped making their own hay about 20 years ago and now purchase what they need. “When we sold the baler, that was liberation day for me,” Steve said, noting that he was making his own hay plus doing custom baling for neighbors.



“Haymaking took a lot of time away from our cows and grass. The cows have to be the number one priority when you’re in this business, and making hay just kept me from things I needed to be doing,” Steve said. “Admittedly, there have been dry years when we’ve had to pull the cattle off pasture and feed purchased hay in a sacrifice pasture. Afterward, we just renovate the pasture

once conditions improve.”

TOXICITY MITIGATION

“All of our fescue is toxic,” Steve said. “We calve from mid-April through May, trying to match our cows’ nutritional needs and availability to the grass. Judy moves the cows — usually that means every day, but it could also be up to every three days.

We try to take at least a third of the plant off each spring on all of our pastures to reduce seedhead formation.”

If needed, Steve will also clip pastures high to control seedhead development and promote tillering. That said, he no longer worries if some of their pastures get too tall. They’ve learned how to still use those pastures and also enjoy the wildlife benefits that taller pastures can offer. The Freemans don’t fertilize their pastures. “We feel like we get enough nitrogen cycling from manure and mineralization to keep pastures productive,” Steve said.

Through years of trial and error, the Freemans now have their 88 pastures fenced in rectangles or squares and use polywire and step-in posts to portion available forage to the cattle within the paddocks. “Flexibility is essential in this business,” Steve asserted, “and even those who don’t start that way eventually get to that point. We have about 120 watering points and strip-graze in the winter.”

Over time, their pastures have become
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more diverse, and their cattle often tend to graze the nonfescue species first. “We actually see more fescue toxicity effects in the fall when the pastures revert to a higher percentage of tall fescue,” Judy said.

Cattle are grazed the entire year, but the Freemans use bale grazing on stockpiled fescue to slow movement during the winter. Clover is also frost seeded into pastures. “I love to sow seed,” Steve said. “I’ll sow ryegrass where the pastures get damaged, and I’ve also seeded some chicory. I’ve been trying to grow warm-season grasses. That’s still a work in progress. We’ve had some failures and successes, but I still want to get more established,” he added.

SETTLED ON SOUTH POLLS

The long road of experimentation with grass has also extended to the cows. Through the years, there have been periods of Angus and Beefmaster, but the Freemans finally settled on South Polls.

“Before we switched, our cows probably weighed 1,300 to 1,600 pounds,” Steve said. “Calving ease became a real problem, especially for the first-calf heifers.”

It was Judy who suggested they do something different, so they bought some South Poll bulls to breed their heifers.

“Those bulls were small and gentle and didn’t seem to be affected by the heat like the Angus were,” Judy said. Steve added, “They were nonstop breeders, gained weight, and I swear, had a smile on their faces during the whole breeding season. It was amazing.”

The Freemans really liked the South Poll-Beefmaster cross and soon started keeping the calves after initially selling them. “Since then, we’ve been exclusively South Poll,” Judy said. “The South Polls really do well in our Missouri heat and have excellent reproductive performance. That’s important because we are breeding in July and August.”

Steve said that they keep all of the heifers and sell an equal number of cows to interested buyers, mostly for breeding stock. They also keep a few bulls to use and sell. Animals that don’t breed on time, or don’t perform well in their system, are freely culled.

“In the beef cattle business, you’ve got to be pretty bare bones. You have to increase your margins, and you’ve got to increase your turnover,” Steve said. “All of this hinges on how you manage your grass and your ability to keep the cows’ nutrition and intake needs in sync with grass growth.”

It’s been over 40 years since the Freemans left the West Coast shimmering in the rearview mirror of their 1-ton van. The journey since has been fraught with numerous trials and errors. These days, there are still challenges, but also a much higher level of contentment as the Freemans are more easily able to enjoy the cows, the grass, the plant diversity, and wildlife that all permeate their highly regarded beef operation.



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