

Grazing Along

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A newborn lamb with his mother and sibling. Lambing season is the only time Mike Sands doesn't graze his sheep and cattle together. Otherwise, grazing the animals together is beneficial to their health and the farm's soil.

Photo by Paula Combs

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A large herd of fluffy, yet still intimidating, sheep run full speed through a gate as they're rotated to an alternate pasture at Over Jordan Farm in Flint Hill, Va.

"I don't use herding dogs. The animals are trained to come to me and follow me," says farm manager and Bean Hollow Grassfed owner Mike Sands, who has over 30 years of experience in sustainable agriculture, environmental conservation and community-based economic development.

After receiving a grant from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in 2013, PEC began working with Mike on a three-year project to create a place where livestock producers can see and evaluate different management practices and their effects on livestock health, weight gain and soil and pasture health.

Like many farms in the region, Over Jordan Farm is a pasture-based operation. But after years of overgrazing, the land faced issues that are common in the area—poor soil health, a lack of grass and plant diversity and the resulting lack of nutrients for livestock. This decreases a farm's profitability and it's also a major source of runoff and soil erosion.

Mike is very business driven, and also cares deeply about the land. "The goal is to make money farming and improve the environment at the same time—not to see those as conflicting goals."

Over the last two years, Mike has been implementing rotational and multi-species grazing—two techniques shown to improve the health of the land and livestock. With the use of portable fencing, about 200 ewes, 220 lambs and between 15-25 cattle are moved from field to field.

“I use poly wire, which is basically plastic and metal on a reel, and I run the juice through that to make an electric fence. This allows me to change where I graze at any given time, based on how much grass there is, or drought conditions, or wet conditions, or middle of summer, or end of summer— whatever,” explains Mike.



Other management objectives for the farm are native grasses for summer grazing, stockpiled fescue for winter strip-grazing, and improved and unimproved mixed grass pastures.

“In this environment, it doesn’t make sense to just have native warm season grasses, but they are the perfect complement for me in July and August, when other grasses start to slump. And at that point, the warm season grasses—whether it’s switch grass or big blue stem or Indian grass or eastern gama grass—they all produce an enormous amount of biomass,” Mike stresses.

Every six months, PEC and Mike collect data on the farm to measure plant diversity, soil and abiotic characteristics, and water holding capacity. The project also measures animal performance and financial performance.

So far, there has been an increase in organic matter over the last three years in all of the fields. “There are no bare spots in the fields anymore. Greater soil cover. More diversity in the pasture,” says Mike, “The benefits of grazing the sheep and cattle together, number one: they eat different things so you get a better utilization of the forage. And for soil health benefit: We try to group the animals tighter together in smaller areas. So what we’re doing is giving longer rest periods but more intense pressure— disturbance—on the soil.”

Mike’s management techniques are also having a positive effect on plant diversity. Weeds are decreasing significantly due to the rotational grazing, which is safeguarding the lush grass that doesn’t allow weeds to grow—this allows for less use of herbicides.

“Over the past two years we’ve seen an improvement in both the productivity of the pastures and the financial returns. Two years is a short period, but we expect to see increased productivity and returns over the next few years,” says Mike.

The project is wrapping up this fall, and Mike’s advice to other farmers is, “If you’re going to look at your animals on a daily basis anyways, then this type of grazing isn’t more labor if you train the animals. And I think in the long run, it’s actually labor saving because you’re with the animals so much. They’re much calmer around you. So, when you do have to put them into a corral, it’s a piece of cake.”

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