Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies

Volume 9
Issue 2 Special Issue: Agriculture, the Environment, and Plain People

2021

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Effective Communication and Programming When Working with Amish Farmers: Reflections from a Wisconsin Agriculture Educator

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Abstract: The author, an agricultural educator who worked with the Amish in Wisconsin for over 30 years, discusses his outreach efforts, which have been focused on managed grazing, a method well suited to Amish producers. Managed grazing offers agronomic, economic, and ecological benefits. A key educational tool for communicating managed grazing practices is the pasture walk, and the author relates lessons learned from these events. The communal nature and focus on farmer-to-farmer information exchange is well received by Amish producers. It is helpful if pasture walk scheduling is done well in advance and is focused on farmer-based problems with farmer-based solutions rather than an emphasis on the wisdom of university experts. Given their collective experiences, a group of Amish farmers together are able to navigate complex grazing-related questions effectively at this event. While certain Amish producers may have technological restrictions that may make managed grazing more difficult, as with restrictions on electric fencing, creative solutions may exist. [Abstract by editors.]

Keywords: managed intensive grazing; rotational grazing; outreach communication; innovation diffusion; agriculture extension; pasture walks

MANAGED INTENSIVE GRAZING

Managed Intensive Grazing (or “Rotational Grazing”) is a viable method to improve farm profitability. It was introduced to farmers in the Midwest in the 1980s. The great American farm crises of the 1980s and the nationwide 1988 drought stimulated farmers to consider various options. Managed grazing was ripe for widespread use due both to the need for improved profitability and technological innovations in fencing and electric fencing energizers. (Nothing spurs innovation like having your back against the wall and facing bankruptcy!) The genesis of managed grazing was in France and is based on the Andre Voisin publication of Grass Productivity, an Introduction to Rational Grazing (Voisin also used the phrase “rational grazing”). Then the rotational grazing movement in New Zealand sparked widespread emulation here in the Midwest United States. The strategic use of pasture, coupled with the timed movement of livestock, led to many economic, agronomic, and ecological benefits. For example, farmers may be able to reduce feed and machin-
cery costs, improve animal health, and reduce erosion using managed grazing. These benefits, coupled with the absolute need to improve profitability, spurred farmers to explore this system. Some Amish producers were drawn to the practice of managed rotational grazing, perhaps because it was seen as a more traditional system.

**PASTURE WALKS: OVERVIEW AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES**

Managed grazing was a central focus of my 30-plus years working in the Wisconsin Extension Service in Southwestern and Northeastern Wisconsin. In both locations, grazing education was a large part of my Extension education effort, drawing on my background in education and agricultural engineering. One-on-one on-farm visits and 10 to 14 pasture walks a season were the main events. For 26 years, I facilitated the pasture walks in parts of Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin with numerous Amish participants.

While I did not develop any “Amish only” educational events, I did do some targeted outreach efforts and developed one educational handout designed with Amish input. The outcome of these outreach efforts resulted in farmers in two Amish settlements adopting managed intensive rotational grazing practices.

As pasture walks and grazing discussion groups grew in popularity, local farmers started adopting managed grazing techniques. And as often happens, the early adopters were watched by their neighbors. Personal observation, looking across the fence, and/or reading about successful grazing operations of other like-minded farmers got people to attend a managed grazing educational event.

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While there was minimal research and educational outreach efforts from the University around managed grazing, especially focused on dairy cows, the research that did exist within Range Management and other related areas was generally not embraced by the farmers. One reason farmers may not have been receptive to university research is that they perceived that the university was adding to the misery of “the get big or get out message” promoted by some researchers and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Effective educational programs must be well planned and, if developed for an entire season, must be systematic. Pasture walk planning in Southwestern Wisconsin was done in February and the 9- to 10-month complete schedule, with specific farm questions to be answered or at least addressed, was mailed out in March (Figure 1). Getting a schedule together required collaboration between a subgroup of the Great River Graziers (240 members in a farmer-based organization), myself, the University of Wisconsin (UW) Agriculture agent, representatives of other co-sponsoring groups, and the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Grazing specialist. After this planning group considered 15 to 20 farms whose practices we could highlight, we contacted the farmers to see if they were interested in hosting a pasture walk, and if so, the topic they would like to discuss at the pasture walk; a pasture walk host farmer would be looking for input to improve his operation. Our approach also made it clear that the pasture walk was about improving an operation, not showcasing a perfect managed grazing setup.

Having a yearly schedule out in March was beneficial for all farmer participants but it was especially helpful for plain growers who had to engage a ride or hire a driver to attend. (Getting the scheduling finalized in March was difficult, getting farmers to commit to something weeks and months in advance was like herding cats!) In addition, the pasture walks were conducted on a regular schedule of every first and third Tuesday of the month with the same starting time so that there would be as little confusion as possible from month to month.

The format for an effective pasture walk/facilitated discussion was relatively simple and yet had to be followed carefully to ensure a quality educational event. The facilitator had to be willing and able to direct the conversation and discussion. This was sometimes an uncomfortable role because the facilitator had to firmly but respectfully ask people to adhere to the pasture walk rules. Two rules were stated at the start of every pasture walk that I facilitated. The first rule was that one person talks and the rest listen. The second rule was that if participants disagreed while stating their observations or experiences, they were to disagree agreeably. We did our best to ensure participant interaction by drawing people out or rephrasing a question and by allowing everyone who wished to be heard a chance to talk by calling
# Figure 1: First Page of a Pasture Walk Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When</th>
<th>Host(s)</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Topic(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 26</td>
<td>Christopher Baird</td>
<td>Seneca: Hwy 27 N. approx. 10 mi. on Left. You’ll travel past Co Rd C intersection - go approx. 3/4 mi. N. Farm on the Left. Ferryville: Co Rd C approx. 9 mi. Left on WI 27 N. 3/4 mi. N. Farm on the Left.</td>
<td>Moving into full pasture away from stored &amp; managing a variable sward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 a.m.</td>
<td>(608) 632-1769</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viola, WI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 20</td>
<td>Vernor Cty</td>
<td>Sponsor - Kickapoo Grazing Initiative (KGI)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday</td>
<td>Kellogg Pavilion</td>
<td>To plan for lunch, RSVP required</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 a.m.</td>
<td>In the park by the river</td>
<td>Contact: Cynthia Olmstead</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>KGI Project Director</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><a href="mailto:info@kickapoo.grazing.initiative.com">info@kickapoo.grazing.initiative.com</a> OR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>608-608-6022</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;This Pasture Walk Field day is a follow-up to the April 29 Grassfed Beef Workshop&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 31</td>
<td>Don Boland</td>
<td>Seneca: Hwy 27 N. Travel approx. 3 mi. Don’s farm is on the right side of Hwy 27.</td>
<td>Buying Cattle Seminar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fire #18732</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 a.m.</td>
<td>(608) 734-3570</td>
<td>Guest Speaker: Nicholas (Nick) Baker, Rock County Agriculture Agent/Crops &amp; Soils Emphasis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 14</td>
<td>Ron Leum</td>
<td>Vernon County - From Westby: West on US 14 approximately 1 mi. Farm is on right side of road.</td>
<td>Soil Health/Pasture Renovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>(Gary Leum’s farm)</td>
<td>Fire # 7552</td>
<td>&amp; Importance of Pollinators. Kim Kester, National Bee Queen, keeps hives at the farm &amp; joining Ron to talk about incorporating &amp; enhancing pollinators with farm operations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 a.m.</td>
<td>E7552 Hwy 14 Westby, WI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 25</td>
<td>Ethan/Jade Proksch</td>
<td>Vernon County - From Genoa: E on 56 approx. 5 mi. Bear left on Newton Rd. 2.8 mi. to farm.</td>
<td>Moving forward with management methods to intensify grazing with dairy goats &amp; maximize forage/ paddock while maintaining goat health &amp; milk production.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday</td>
<td>(608) 483-2476</td>
<td>Fire # S3830</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 a.m.</td>
<td>S3830 Newton Road</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Genoa, WI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 12</td>
<td>Art Wall</td>
<td>Eastman: Wisconsin 27/N/Main St. Follow 27 N. 1.6 miles; Left to Wall Ridge Rd. 1 mile. Left to Bernards Lane .5 mile. Farm is on Right.</td>
<td>Overall grazing challenges with a possibility of a severe summer slump with a clover/alalfa orchard grown dual purpose hay &amp; grazing paddock.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>(608) 874-4603</td>
<td>Guest Speaker: Organic Valley Soil Agronomist - Mark Kopecky</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30 a.m.</td>
<td>26343 Bernard Rd.</td>
<td>Watch for Pasture Walk Signs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eastman WI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
on people or asking others to wait until others had
spoke. We also tried to keep the terminology ac-
cessible to the audience during the pasture walks.
Given that Amish participants are bilingual, I was
especially attentive to use of terms or applications
commonly used by everyone. In addition, it was
essential to keep the program on schedule (i.e.,
each pasture walk is no longer than 90 minutes).

A crowd often produces a better result than
one individual, provided that the crowd is reason-
ablely informed about what is being asked and that
they care about the question (Surowiecki 2004).
I have witnessed repeatedly that after a thorough
discussion of a question posed to the group during
a pasture walk, the final answer was quite a bit
better than mine or other folks’ initial responses.
This also points out how important it is to tap
into the wisdom of those that are attending and
to make sure, through careful facilitation, that ev-
everyone is participating. Truly, 15 to 20 heads are
much better than one if the discussion is structured
so all can listen and have input. (This would be a
direct rebuke to the thought that the masses are
disruptive.)

Here’s an example of how a group discus-
sion at one of the pasture walks provided a bet-
ter answer to a complex issue than any individual
response. The discussion focused on the summer
slump issue where most of the pasture grasses
and legumes slow way down or go dormant dur-
ing the heat of the summer. The first response to
navigate this issue was to incorporate annual for-
eges, such as fall oats, into the pasture. However,
this was later rejected given the expected high
temperatures. Then warm season forage crops
were suggested including Sudan, Sorghum, or
Sorghum Sudan. Since these are warm season an-
nuals, this suggestion was accepted by the group.
A concern was raised that if these grasses were
grazed late into the fall or early winter, there could
be a chance of prussic acid poisoning (frost tends
to cause this condition in Sudan, Sorghums, and
Sorghum/Sudan hybrids). A suggestion was made
to have all summer slump paddocks grazed before
there was a chance of frost. This suggestion was
met with skepticism, as it was thought that this
level of management was too difficult to attain.
There was also the possibility that grazing ani-
mals could die if there was an untimely frost. The
possible death of a grazing animal was considered
too high a penalty for missing the mark. Next, it
was recommended that the animals be kept off the
paddocks if there was a chance of frost. This ap-
proach was also rejected because there would be
too much wasted forage. Then someone suggested
that corn be used as an alternative forage because
it is a warm season grass and tolerates both higher
air and soil temperatures than the cool season
grasses. Also it can be drilled or planted into a pad-
dock. If non-genetically modified (GM) corn seed
is used, the farmer could use his own harvested
seed from the previous year to greatly reduce the
cost. The most important benefit of incorporating
corn is that freezing does not produce prussic acid.
Finally, corn produces great tonnage and can be
grazed through the fall and winter, if needed. In
summary, the group provided many different ex-
périences and was able to find a feasible solution.

Pasture walks were carefully constructed edu-
cational events with a very defined methodology
and were not glorified show-and-tell moments
for the host farmer(s). This approach seemed to
resonate with farmers, especially many Amish
participants. I asked one Amish participant why
he attended. He responded that he liked how the
event was run; everyone got a chance to talk or
ask questions; only one person talked at a time, so
he was able to hear the questions and answers; it
was in the neighborhood (relatively local); and he
could listen to and ask questions of serious gra-
ziers interested in improving their farms.

Communication to Amish producers about
upcoming events was done in several ways: di-
rect postcard reminders during the season, with
dates of the next three or four walks, along with
brief overviews of the topics to be discussed;
announcements in the local Amish newsletters;
and finally ads in the local, freely distributed
shopper’s guides. Printed information was avail-
able at all pasture walks and it was also posted
to the County Extension website. Included with
research-based information related to that day’s
pasture walk, I also gave out complimentary cop-
ies of Graze magazine, which had articles written
by Amish farmers and an advisory panel that had
Amish members.

We had guest speakers at many of the pasture
walks (on average 1/3 of the time). They were
oftentimes University specialists or other content
specialists. This did not seem to be a big draw or
a detriment for Amish participation. In a private
conversation with Amish farmers, there was spe-
pecific mention of distrust of “experts.” However, those presenters that were also practitioners—for example, those who had farms and practiced managed grazing on those farms—were always well received and respected. The biggest multipliers in terms of drawing interest in managed grazing were when an Amish farmer would adopt managed grazing practices himself. From there, I could point out the adoption and let others talk to those people within their communities.

**OTHER EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES**

One educational piece that was developed specifically for the Amish was a laminated postcard size outline of the four basic tenets of managed rotational grazing. This was the result of collaboration with the Great Rivers Grazing Group and myself, refining the “how to do it” points in one, small, portable format. The rationale was to have all the basics in one place; from there, individuals could expand on their observations and experiences.

The last most important piece for me as an educator was to have sufficient time to respond to farm visit requests. While farm visits were extremely labor-intensive, they were also extremely important to help encourage and fine-tune grazing practices. Often a farm visit sealed the deal in getting farmers to consider adopting rotational grazing. One way I tried to get more bang for the trip was to ask the farmer to have a neighbor also come to listen, or if they were not comfortable with that, just let the neighbors know I was available for additional farm visits that day.

**REMAINING QUESTIONS**

Many Amish farmers have adopted managed intensive grazing as a result of these outreach efforts, but I still have questions about how to adapt outreach and education efforts across diverse Amish groups. For example, there is still a large barrier to adoption given some of the prohibitions on fencing technology among several settlements. In Cashton, in southwestern Wisconsin, the Amish church does not allow portable electric fencing while a nearby Amish settlement, Hillsboro, allows it. While one can adapt managed grazing with permanent fencing, it is not ideal and is more expensive adding impediments to adoption. One wonders if Amish churches that do not allow individual ownership of portable electric fencing might allow communal ownership or allow farmers to rent or borrow the equipment from a grazing group. Given farmer involvement and networking to encourage managed grazing adoption, I also wonder how to get Amish farmers more involved in grazing groups. I wonder how and why Amish farmers are active in grazing groups in some areas of the country such as Northern Indiana but in other areas, such as Southwestern Wisconsin, they are not heavily involved. I would welcome thoughts, suggestions, and questions from Amish readers and other service providers who work with plain people so we can all learn from each other.

**REFERENCES**

