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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-

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ery 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.

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).

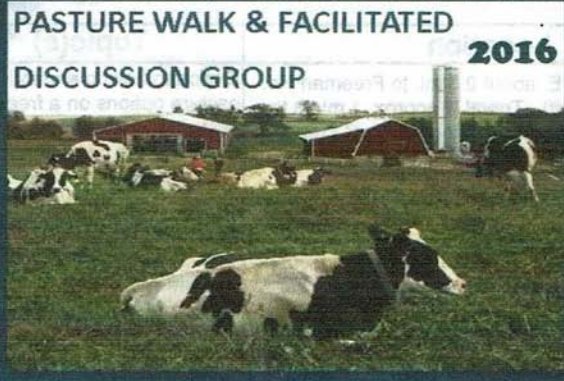
Effective educational programs must be well planned and, if developed for an entire season,

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



PASTURE WALK & FACILITATED DISCUSSION GROUP 2016

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Hosted by:
Great River Graziers

For more information contact
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When	Host(s)	Location	Topic(s)
April 26 Tuesday 10:30 a.m.	Christopher Baird (608) 632-1769 12241 State Hwy 27 Ferryville, WI	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.	Moving into full pasture away from stored & managing a variable sward.
May 20 Friday 10:30 a.m.	Viola, WI Vernon Cty Meet at Kellogg Pavilion In the park by the river Near State Rd 131 & 56 <i>RSVP by May 13</i>	Sponsor - Kickapoo Grazing Initiative (KGI) To plan for lunch, RSVP required Contact: Cynthia Olmstead KGI Project Director info@kickapoo Grazing Initiative.com OR 608-606-6022 *This Pasture Walk Field day is a follow-up to the April 29 Grassfed Beef Workshop*	Buying Cattle Seminar Talks by longtime graziers Larry Smith, Jim Munch & Vance Haugen. Field Day at Matthes Farms Cattle Auction operations Participants may stay for afternoon Cattle Auction.
May 31 Tuesday 10:30 a.m.	Don Boland (608) 734-3570 18732 Hwy 27 Gays Mills, WI	Seneca: Hwy 27 N. Travel approx. 3 mi. Don's farm is on the right side of Hwy 27. Fire #18732 Guest Speaker: Nicholas (Nick) Baker, Rock County Agriculture Agent/Crops & Soils Emphasis	Surviving the forage/pasture tsunami. Determining which & how many pastures/paddocks to make hay on or how many to hold back to maintain the grazing wedge & milk production.
June 14 Tuesday 10:30 a.m.	Ron Leum 608-606-4837 (Gary Leum's farm) E7552 Hwy 14 Westby, WI	Vernon County - From Westby: West on US 14 approximately 1 mi. Farm is on right Side of road. Fire #7552	Soil Health/Pasture Renovation & Importance of Pollinators. Kim Kester, National Bee Queen, keeps hives at the farm & joining Ron to talk about incorporating & enhancing pollinators with farm operations.
June 25 Saturday 10:30 a.m.	Ethan/Jade Proksch (608) 483-2476 S3830 Newton Road Genoa, WI	Vernon County - From Genoa: E on 56 approx. 5 mi. Bear left on Newton Rd. 2.8 mi. to farm. Fire # S3830	Moving forward with management methods to intensify grazing with dairy goats & maximize forage/paddock while maintaining goat health & milk production.
July 12 Tuesday 10:30 a.m.	Art Wall (608) 874-4603 26343 Bernard Rd. Eastman WI	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. Guest Speaker: Organic Valley Soils Agronomist - Mark Kopecky	Overall grazing challenges with a possibility of a severe summer slump with a clover/alfalfa orchard grown dual purpose hay & grazing paddock.

Watch for Pasture Walk Signs

on people or asking others to wait until others had spoken. We also tried to keep the terminology accessible 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 reasonably 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 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 discussion at one of the pasture walks provided a better 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 during the heat of the summer. The first response to navigate this issue was to incorporate annual forages, 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 annuals, 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 animals 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 approach 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 paddock. 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 experiences and was able to find a feasible solution.

Pasture walks were carefully constructed educational 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 graziers interested in improving their farms.

Communication to Amish producers about upcoming events was done in several ways: direct 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 available 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 copies 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-

cific 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.

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