

# Beefing up staffers' grazing expertise



## Technical Training and Certification Program course culminates in hands-on pasture work with UMN Extension facility's herd of cattle

GRAND RAPIDS — Twenty-two field staffers from across the state took 2½ years of webinars and field trainings into the pasture this season for a three-day Advanced Grazing Management training at the University of Minnesota (UMN) Extension's North Central Research and Outreach Center (NCROC).

Most of the trainees work for soil and water conservation districts or the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Several are new NRCS rangeland management specialists. Since the COVID-19 pandemic put in-person trainings on hold in 2020, the Aug. 16-18 event

**From top:** Instructor Morgan Kauth, Marshall-based NRCS range management specialist, demonstrated how to collect forage samples. He was among the instructors who led a three-day Advanced Grazing Management training in mid-August at UMN Extension's North Central Research and Outreach Center near Grand Rapids. Waconia-based NRCS District Conservationist Katelyn Mattila set up a paddock. Jeff Duchene, NRCS state rangeland management specialist, left, and Troy Salzer, UMN Extension ag production systems educator, were among the trainers. **Photo Credits:** Jon Sellnow, BWSR





Supplies awaited the four groups of trainees who set up paddocks designed to feed two cow-calf pairs for 24 hours. The exercise was part of a three-day Advanced Grazing Management training in mid-August at UMN Extension's North Central Research and Outreach Center near Grand Rapids. **Photo Credit:** Dean Thomas, Fillmore SWCD

was the first hands-on opportunity for many.

"It's meant to be the final piece of the puzzle for people that are working with livestock," said Jon Sellnow, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Technical Training and Certification Program (TTCP) coordinator. Prerequisites covered planning with Minnesota livestock producers, pasture condition scoring, forage production estimating, and grazing facilitating practices.

The highest-level grazing training offered in Minnesota, the Advanced Grazing Management training equips field staff to work with livestock producers to plan, design and install rotational grazing systems.

"Every site is different. Nobody manages the same way. Hands-on is better than any textbook because you get the idea of how to talk with farmers," said Dean Thomas, a Fillmore Soil & Water Conservation

District-based grazing and soil health specialist who also grazes cattle.



Thomas was among the trainers, who included experts from NRCS and UMN Extension.

Thomas used his experience working with graziers in southeastern Minnesota's bluff country as an example:

"When you look at a fence on a computer, it might be flat ground, 1% slope. You get out in the real world — where I'm at you might be dealing with 15 or 20% (slope). Gullies. Now that's a challenge. How are you going to build this fence on this type of landscape?"

Fencing and watering systems, forage estimating and pasture plant ID — including 60 potted plants

— were part of the hands-on training.

"It really gave me a better appreciation of how complex grazing systems are and everything that producers have to know about when they're doing a grazing operation — everything from knowing which forage species are best to being able to figure out how long you should be keeping your cattle out — there's really a lot that goes into it," said Mallory Malecek, who completed the training. A Waseca-based NRCS soil conservationist, she is the grazing project contact for Waseca, Blue Earth and Faribault counties.

Malecek taught biology in Oregon before returning to Minnesota and joining NRCS just over a year ago. While she grew up in the agricultural community of St. Peter, she did not grow up on a farm.

"I do not have that firsthand experience. That's why these trainings have been super-helpful in working with the

## Rotational grazing systems' benefits

Trainers listed benefits of rotational grazing systems.

**ECONOMIC:** Increased forage production in existing systems; improved forage quality, which can result in healthier animals with increased weight gain; use of cover crops for forage (cover crops feed livestock; livestock fertilizes with manure)

**ENVIRONMENTAL:** Improved water quality by restricting access to sensitive areas such as wetlands; reduced soil erosion and improved soil quality by converting marginal cropland to pasture; improved wildlife habitat

grazing specialists. Because I don't have that background, when I started this job I was essentially starting from scratch," Malecek said.

Her favorite part of the training was an exercise in which trainees assumed the role of graziers.

For that experiment, four teams devised four paddocks meant to feed two cow-calf pairs for 24 hours. On hands and knees, they clipped forage samples. Based on the forage and the weight of the cattle, they calculated paddock size. NCROC staff weighed and wrangled the cattle.

The group returned the next day to see the results.

"Did the cows go hungry and walk through the fence? Was there way too much forage left over, or was it pretty close?" Sellnow said. "That



The NCROC's staff, cattle and pasture made the paddock experiment possible. The staff weighed and herded the animals. Ten acres of its 160-acre pasture were reserved for the training, with forage at just the right height to be grazed. **Photo Credit:** Dean Thomas, Fillmore SWCD

was probably the best part of this training, was doing this live demonstration.”

Eric Mousel, Grand Rapids-based UMN Extension regional cow-calf management educator, said the paddock experiment always produces a range of results. The grass in one paddock may appear untouched; the next may be grazed nearly to the ground, well below the 4-inch target height.

“To really see it in person, how the calculations transfer into real life, you can see that it just opens up this whole new world,” Mousel said. And that leads to a slew of new questions: Was there an error in calculations? Did the rainstorm have an effect? Which grass species did the cattle prefer?

Mousel also hosted trainees on his farm south of Grand Rapids, where he raises beef cattle with his wife and her family. There, field staffers assessed the potential for pasture improvements, designed and presented rotational grazing scenarios, and then heard Mousel’s feedback.

Sellnow said the site posed an array of challenges — streams, wetlands, marginally productive farmland, forested

areas. Mousel said the conversation gave trainees experience with being direct — but not too direct — with producers.

“You’re talking about something that this person you’re talking to has committed their entire life to. There’s certain topics you have to be a little bit careful about how you approach, and you get that from experience more than anything,” Mousel said.

“The way you see it may not be exactly how that producer sees it,” Mousel said. “So make sure that you really explain the overarching idea that you’re trying to get across, and don’t worry so much about the implementation. Because you’re not going to find people that are better at figuring out how to implement something than farmers and ranchers. They’ll figure out how to get it done as soon as they buy into the idea, whatever that idea is.”

Thomas said the aim was to make trainees comfortable working with producers. So, like Mousel, he offered insights into producers’ realities.

“The biggest key is you’ve got to ask them how much time do they have,” Thomas said.

Most work full time off the farm, which leaves little time for management.

From there, Thomas interviews producers to learn what type of livestock they have, how many acres they plan to graze, whether they’ll establish rotational grazing, whether seeding will be required, if they’ve tested soil fertility, where the animals will over-winter, what time of year they’ll calf or kid.

“I treat them how I want to be treated,” Thomas said. “You’ve got to go in there not being cocky or thinking you know it all. You’ve got to listen. If you start thinking you know more than they do about their operation, you’ve lost them. You might as well pack up and leave.”

Getting to know producers is especially important because grazing plans have so many variables: the number and type of animals, acreage, forage quality, type of fence, length of grazing rotation, stationary or portable water tanks, concrete or rock heavy-use protection.

Thomas presents alternatives. Producers ultimately decide.

“You’ve got to feel like they’re a friend. You’ve got to give them respect,” Thomas said.

Malecek said the skills she

gained will help her to understand how producers’ operations work and to more effectively communicate which programs might be a good fit.

“These systems that we’re helping them put in place, they’re probably going to be there for quite a while, so making sure that we’re setting them up for success and knowing the best strategies of how to implement a plan effectively (is important),” Malecek said.

The next step for those who completed the training may be to seek Job Approval Authority, which is based on demonstrated competence. The next hands-on rotational grazing workshop will likely be in 2025.



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