

The Grass IS Greener on the Other Side of This Fence! BY Nancy Glazier

As part of the Graze New York grant project in Wayne County, the NWNYS Team held a pasture walk at Joseph Schmucker's farm in Clyde. We couldn't have had a better evening for early October, other than we ran out of daylight!

Background Joseph grazes 91 sheep on about 20 acres, his goal is to have 140. He has only been on the farm since August 2004. He had the pasture seeded the spring of 2004 with Alice white clover/perennial ryegrass, fine-leaved fescue and meadow fescue pasture mix at 35 lbs per acre. He considers himself a grass farmer, which is really the way to look at grazing. The most important commodity on the farm is grass.

Seeding Rate Do you think 35 lbs of seed per acre is high? It depends on what your goals are. Joseph wishes he went higher! If you are looking for high animal production, you need premium forage. Joseph states you shouldn't see one speck of soil, it all should be covered with forage; this greatly reduces soil loss from rain, and water loss in dry conditions. He did go in early last spring and do some frost seedings on some of the thinner spots of the paddocks.

Drill vs. Broadcast Joseph prefers broadcasting seed to drilling for pasture establishment. He feels with drilling too much ground is bare at the seedling stage which encourages weed growth. Seed depth needs to be shallow at $\frac{1}{4}$ " and can be pressed in with a cultipacker. With the time and effort put in to pasture establishment, it needs to be done right. Joseph says establishment costs can be paid for the first year.

Fertility High forage production requires high fertility. The grass needs more nitrogen than what is provided by the legume. Legume percentages need to be 30-40% maximum to prevent bloat in ruminants. Joseph applies a commercial nitrogen fertilizer at spring green-up and another application in summer. For intensively managed grasses the recommendation is 100 lbs actual Nitrogen at green-up, 50 lbs every 30 days with the final application prior to last grazing rotation for the season. Joseph knows the importance of soil testing, that is on his "to do" list for the fall.

Days of Grazing Joseph pushed the limit on the number of days grazing on his short time on the farm. He grazed last season up until January 1 and had the sheep back on pasture April 1! Every growing season is different, but the key is not to overgraze the pastures. He turns the sheep into a paddock when forage height is 10-12" doesn't let the livestock graze it shorter than 2-3". He warned one day of overgrazing in the fall could mean two days of delay in spring grazing. Granted, he does say his farm is not up to carrying capacity, but that's still about 275 days of grazing.

Fencing and Paddock Size The farm has a perimeter fence of woven wire with interior fencing of high tensile and some areas of woven wire. On the interior, the bottom high tensile wire is low enough to keep the lambs in, but high enough to let the sheep graze under the fence. The only time the sheep have gotten out was when the gate was left open. Half the pasture is subdivided into one-acre paddocks where the sheep begin grazing in the spring. The other half of the pasture is harvested for hay. Joseph plans for the dry summer months and utilizes the hay paddock for grazing when grass growth slows. Three days is usually the limit he will leave the sheep on a paddock; any longer and they begin to graze the regrowth, which will delay further growth. He only needs the fence electrified for the third day when he is trying to get the sheep to “clean up” the paddock. Plenty of good grass keeps them in!

Weeds One problem Joseph did have was with the weed horsenettle. Horsenettle contains atropine, which is toxic to ruminants. Fortunately, the sheep won't graze it since there is ample forage available. Weeds may need to be spot sprayed when a grass/legume mix is used. Sometimes clipping the paddocks will control weed growth. This will benefit the pasture as well as it helps stimulate regrowth.

Make the Sacrifice Joseph has a couple of areas he utilizes as sacrifice areas for the sheep during inclement conditions. He can feed the sheep hay and keep them off the paddocks to allow them to rest or regrow. At 24 feet wide his alleyway is wide enough to use for sacrifice area, along with two small paddocks adjacent to the barn.

Joseph may be grazing sheep on his pasture, but the same principles can apply to beef, dairy and even buffalo!



Bill demonstrates this paddock is ready to graze!