

CWF FARMER PROFILE: Mike Nickels

Jefferson County Delaware Watershed

By Connie Pantle



Mike Nickels with the sign illustrating his living snow fence demonstration area located behind the schoolhouse. Submitted Photo

McLouth, Kan.—A 1946 Chevrolet pickup truck parks in front of a red, one room school house on top of a hill in northeast Kansas. Then, a man steps out of the truck and walks toward the school house. Behind the school house wildflowers bloom among grasses blowing in the wind. Beyond that is a living fence of plum and olive trees. It looks like a scene from sixty years ago. But it isn't. It is a modern farm in Jefferson County and the owners are Mike Nickels and his wife Debbie.

During Mike's lifelong residency of Jefferson County, his 700 acre farm has seen a lot of changes. But it is what appears unchanged that Mike is most proud of. Mike said he strives to improve the land and protect our greatest renewable resource, "Mother Nature".

Mike has three functions that keep him busy full-time. He is a landowner, offers land management services and a guided hunting experience through "Old School Guide Service".

As a landowner, Mike saw the importance of preserving his family's farm ponds. Mike said a farm with access to a pond is a real asset. To help preserve the pond, Mike applied for and was approved to receive cost-share through the Kansas Rural Center's Clean Water Farms-River Friendly Farm Project (CWF-RFFP) to implement an alternative watering system next to his pond.

Mike was eligible to apply for the cost-share because he had completed the River Friendly Farms environ-

mental assessment. "I was pleased we were covering so many areas without catastrophes," Mike said. "But the pond jumped out at me." Mike noticed changes in the pond since cleaning it out once several years ago and said, "If we kept doing what we were doing, we were headed down that road again."

Once Mike decided to install an alternative water system, he found he needed some guidance in its implementation. "I was trying to make it too complicated," he said. Mike sought advice from resources like the Kansas Rural Center and his local conservation office. A solar powered pump was installed near the moveable water tank and a garden-type supply hose brings the water up the hill from the pond to the tank. On the other end, the hose is suspended

Water Quality Concerns:

- Livestock waste runoff in pond and creek
- Pond bank erosion

Best Management Practices Implemented:

- Installed a solar powered pump as an alternative water source for livestock
- Fenced pond, excluding livestock
- Excluded livestock from highly erosive areas
- Planted cool and warm season grasses to allow rotation of livestock

near the center of the pond using simply a plastic jug. This method keeps the hose from getting near the edge and possibly below the waterline.

After installing the tank, Mike emphasized the importance of fencing the pond to his tenant. “I researched the benefits of exclusion (of cattle from the pond) and they are greater than allowing the cows to linger in the pond on a hot day.” Mike said he discovered the risk of foot rot is decreased because the animals’ feet are kept dry and clean.

Mike said the watering system, in conjunction with the pond fencing are vital, especially in dry, hot weather. “The watering system really showed its worth this summer during the heat. If livestock had been wallowing in the pond all season there would have been little, if any, water left before the August rains helped out,” he said.

Since fencing the pond, Mike said the cattle are not pushing down the mud around the pond, resulting in an increase in vegetation around the pond, which is vital to wildlife in the area. Mike said waterfowl and wildlife need this vegetative cover. As an example of this, earlier this summer he spotted a fawn hiding in the tall grasses near the pond.

The simple solar system allows Mike to disassemble and move the tank to the other side of the pond in just a few hours. Providing water for the cattle on both sides of the pasture allowed Mike and his tenant to split the pasture and in turn, address the two pastures individually. “We have warm season grasses on one side and cool season grasses on the other side,” he said. This allows the cattle the ability to seasonally graze the pastures which prevents overgrazing and also reduces the amount of manure in each pasture.

In addition to the CWF-RFFP cost-share, Mike received additional funding from the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks for fencing on the project. Through Mike’s experiences, he’s discovered there is funding “out there for almost anything you want to do”.

Other BMPs (best management practices) that Mike introduced included using cover crops to stabilize the soil year round to improve soil quality and reduce nutrient loss; conducting regular soil testing to monitor and manage nutrient needs, and incorporating



The tank and solar panel sit above Mike Nickels’ pond. Mike used CWF-RFFP cost-share to implement the alternative watering system.

Photo by Connie Pantle

surface applied fertilizer immediately after application to minimize runoff. These were all issues that were brought out during the completion of the RFF environmental assessment.

The land management facet of Nickels Farms evolved as Mike began providing conservation and related services for farmers. These services include practices such as controlled burns; erosion management; tree planting; native grass seeding; timber stand improvement; fencing for livestock exclusion, as well as improvement and protection of wildlife habitat. Mike said Nickels Farms provides a service that often times is unavailable or costly through other sources. Since 1993, Mike estimates that he has planted approximately 20,000 seedling trees. Mike also manages six other Jefferson County farms, totaling 1000 acres, on a year-round basis. As a manager of these farms, Mike assists in the land owners in local programs such as Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and keeps the land maintained to the specifics of the program.

Mike said the land management aspect and the hunting guide service aspect just evolved as “the farms were already designed for hunting”. Old School Guide Service offers hunts in pursuit of whitetail deer, eastern turkey and wild quail as well as bass fishing. The guide service has been featured numerous times in “Buckmasters Magazine” and “Rack Magazine”.

Mike has hunters that travel from as far away as the

East Coast and the West Coast, as has found that most hunters like to travel over 500 miles. Typically, the hunters stay in nearby towns like Oskaloosa or Valley Falls, bringing more money into the local economy. Most hunters who harvest a deer are unable to transport the meat. Therefore, they donate the meat to local food banks through Winchester Meat Processing. (More information on Mike's hunting and guide service business can be viewed at www.oldschoolguideservice.com)



The one room school house on Mike Nickels farm was the namesake for his hunting business, Old School Guide Service.

Photo by Connie Pantle

Looking around Mike's farm, his interest in preserving the past is obvious. The 1946 pickup was purchased from Mike's wife, Debbie's family in Oberlin, located in northwest Kansas. While the truck was in decent shape the restoration process had its challenges. "The surprise of refinishing the truck is that it took nine colors to fully detail an old 'green and

black' truck," Mike said. "The wood floor of the bed was replaced with maple that was cut from one of our farms."

Another restoration project on the farm is the old red school house sitting on the hill, the namesake of Old School Guide Service. Mike said it was originally located south of Oskaloosa and known as Clover Hill School, District #54, one of Jefferson County's 100 districts. In 1998, it was moved

13 miles to the Nickels Farm. During the move, the bell tower had to be removed and was replaced atop the schoolhouse at the Nickels Farm. Although Mike estimates the building was built around 1900, he said "the building was in great shape when it was moved".

Preservation and restoration whether nature or history is just part of the daily life on the Nickels farm.