

CWF FARMER PROFILE:

Dale Strickler

Republic County
Republican River
Milford Lake Watershed

By **Connie Pantle**

Courtland, Kansas—Dale Strickler finds something magical about listening to cattle chew. And Strickler has given them a lot to chew on! To keep the leased herd of 32 cow/calf pairs chewing year round, Strickler planted a variety of grasses and forages on his 150 acre farm just south of Courtland.

To illustrate what he has done with alternative forages, Strickler hosted a tour at his farm on September 6 with over 40 people attending. The tour was sponsored by the Kansas Rural Center's Clean Water Farm Project, Kansas Graziers Association and the Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Crops. Strickler said he wants those attending the tour to see that "there's always a better way, no matter how good a job you do."

When Strickler purchased the Republic County farm in 2000, corn and soybeans were grown on the furrow irrigated land. He said "furrow irrigation caused erosion" so he installed one pivot for corn and drip tape irrigation on the remainder.

"I wanted to put the whole farm to pasture," Strickler said. Therefore, he planted mixed grasses and forages including a mixture of brown mid-rib (BMR) sorghum and sudan. Strickler said he "got strange looks from his neighbors when he planted irrigated corn ground to (forage) sorghum". But later, once he turned his herd out on the sorghum, he heard comments like "your calves are really growing".

The cattle flash graze the standing sorghum, which Strickler said fills the late summer gap for feed.



Dale Strickler stands in a field of Eastern gammagrass, birds-foot trefoil, puna chicory and alfalfa—along with the additional forage of pigweed—during a tour of his farm on September 6, 2007.

Photo by Connie Pantle

Water Quality Concerns:

- Soil Erosion and Compaction
- Reduce erosion from flood irrigation on cropland
- Limit access of livestock to pond and streams

Best Management

Practices Implemented:

- Integrated legumes into cropping system to enhance nutrient management
- Planted forages to reduce tillage and increase soil fertility
- Installed a drip irrigation system
- Planted a windbreak to winter cattle on pasture

“Most of the grazing load was carried by this,” he said.

Bordering the BMR, another combination pasture includes Eastern gamagrass; birdsfoot trefoil; a grazing alfalfa, a creeping alfalfa, and puna chicory. Strickler plans for the legumes to meet the cattle’s needs while the gamagrass gets established. There is also a fair amount of pigweed in the field, but Strickler said it is one of the first things the cattle eat and he considers it “additional forage”.

Another mixed pasture includes: sainfoin; cicer milk vetch; reed canary grass, and alfalfa. Strickler said he picked sainfoin and milk vetch with condensed tannins because both plants decrease bloat potential. Strickler said he planted reed canary grass because it is one of the most productive cool-season grasses. In addition, it has spongy roots that absorb moisture, making it tolerable of poor drainage as well as drought.

Strickler said the grasses are a good match for his farming practices partially due to his time commitments with his full-time job. The cattle are able to harvest the crop—the grasses and forages—for him while he is working. “I’m a weekend farmer, but harvesting goes on whether I’m there or not—rain or shine,” he said.

Strickler plans for the cattle to flash graze his corn instead of traditionally harvesting it. He said this eliminates a great deal of energy and allows the cattle to directly distribute the manure back on his field. The cattle also graze on a pasture of forage soybeans, planted after wheat was harvested.

And he said he’d rather invest in the soil and plants than in equipment. “The cattle don’t burn diesel.” Strickler said the cattle help build organic matter and the grasses help stop erosion.

To further his ability to invest in the soil, Strickler completed the River Friendly Farm environmental assessment through the Kansas Rural Center. He said the RFFP is something every farmer should do



TOP: Tour goers view the forage beans that the herd is currently grazing. Dale planted the beans in wheat stubble. BOTTOM: Dale stands in front of his field of brown mid-rib (BMR) sorghum and sudan. The cattle flash grazed the sorghum while it was still standing.

Photo by Connie Pantle



and considers it “premarital counseling” for the farmer. He particularly liked the goal setting portion of the RFFP. “It helps you determine what goals you want to accomplish... pertaining to time and money.” After completing the RFFP, Strickler was approved for cost-share through KRC’s Clean Water Farms Project (CWFP) to seed the farm with alternative grasses and forages.

He also received a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant to plant fourwing saltbush, a shrub that keeps its leaves year-round and is palatable for cattle. The fourwing saltbush project

brought several obstacles including being eaten by rabbits and smothered by weeds. Strickler said he was committed to making the saltbush a success, as his intent is to provide forage for the cattle during winter snowfalls.

The saltbush also provides ample pheasant habitat—Dale said that is “code word for weeds I didn’t have time to control”. He also planted a windbreak for the cattle near the saltbush. The windbreak consists of three rows of red cedars and one row of honey locust trees. Strickler said once the honey locust trees mature the cattle can utilize the trees’ pods, which are very high in sugar and palatable to the cattle. He said it just another way he is allowing the cattle to utilize what they can for forage.

Strickler said for the last eight years, he has poured his heart and soul into his farm and he’s getting close to having things the way he wants. He said wants to be able to just sit back and watch the sun go down while checking on his cattle—and listen to them chew. “It is a beautiful time of day—everything is just right.”



TOP: Dale shows the irrigation tape to those attending his farm tour. The tape is buried beneath much of his farm. BOTTOM: Dale in his field of sainfoin, cicer milk vetch, reed canarygrass and alfalfa.

Photo by Connie Pantle