

CWF FARMER PROFILE: Don Walenta

Butler County

Little Walnut River Little Ark Watershed

By Connie Pantle



Don Walenta installed a 3,000 gallon storage tank and 500 gallon drinking tank, both supplied by a well on his Butler County ranch. A gas-powered generator powers the pump on the well. Don utilizes a rotational grazing system, therefore the alternative system supplies water to his cattle when they are in that portion of the pasture.

Submitted photo

Leon, Kans.—Don Walenta searched for a ranch to purchase for 14 years. And after purchasing the 1,360 acres in Butler County the first thing he did was leave it alone. Don said the native prairie had been taken over with hedge trees and cedars and was overgrazed. “I gave it a year of rest,” he said.

While production from the land is important to Don, conservation practices on his ranch were a necessity. “To me, we are custodians of this Earth and it bothers me to see people destroy it and just leave it,” he said. “We need to do more to take care of what we have.”

Over the past decade, Don has sought assistance from a variety of sources to assist in implementing those conservation practices on his ranch which approximately consists of 960 acres of grass, about 300 acres of cropland and 100 acres of timber.

One of those sources was the River Friendly Farms Project environmental self-assessment. Several years ago, Don completed the assessment at a workshop sponsored by the Butler County Conservation District and the Kansas Rural Center.

Dale Kirkham, Clean Water Farms-River Friendly Farms Project field organizer, and Sandy Koontz, Butler County Conservation District water quality coordinator, conducted the workshop. Sandy said the RFFP “puts it all on the table” and makes farmers and ranchers think of the big picture. “Sometimes issues are brought to the forefront—even something

Water Quality Concerns:

- Erosion of streambank along the Little Walnut River
- Lack of water supply for livestock in one pasture

Best Management

Practices Implemented:

- Installed an alternative water supply, consisting of a well; a gas-powered generator; 500 gallon watering tank, and 3,000 storage tank
- Implemented a rotational grazing system
- Installed rock vanes in Little Walnut River to reduce erosion
- Planted trees seedlings along Little Walnut River to reduce erosion

they didn't think was a problem," she said.

One of the priority areas the RFFP highlighted for Don included the lack of water in one pasture, something he says is vital to his rotational grazing system. A solution for water seemed to be a struggle—Sandy said a Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS) soil conservation technician looked at the site and determined it was not suited for a pond. Then the team looked into a well near the site, which turned out to be unusable. "An existing well was in disrepair, so it was plugged though cost-share (non-point source funding) with the soil conservation office," she said.

After exploring the options, it appeared drilling a new well was the only solution to supply water to that portion of the pasture. To offset some of Don's costs, different cost-share programs were explored. Sandy said the project "didn't fit cost-share practices that the conservation district had available".

Therefore, with assistance from Dale and Sandy, Don applied for cost-share through KRC's CWF-RFFP. "We were able to work with the (Kansas) Rural Center to accomplish some funding," she said. While the CWF-RFFP is unable to pay for capital improvements such as the well itself, KRC was able to provide Don with funds to offset his costs with the original idea of a pump powered by solar panels.

Once the well was drilled it produced only a limited amount of water, therefore Don said "solar wasn't feasible." So the plan was revised to include a 3,000 gallon storage tank and a portable gas-powered generator. While the cattle are in that portion of the pasture, Don, who lives in Wichita, runs the generator about every third day to pump water from the well into the storage tank. The larger storage tank supplies a 500 gallon tank. A float valve shuts off the supply line when the smaller tank is full, insuring the cattle have clean fresh water to drink.

Don said this project improves water quality on his ranch because the cattle "don't trail far to get to wa-



Don was concerned about the amount of erosion along the Little Walnut River. The State Conservation Commission, the Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams (KAWS) and the Watershed Institute all worked together to plan and install rock vanes along the river to reduce erosion.

Submitted Photo

ter." Sandy added that the cattle no longer loaf in the shaded area of an intermittent stream. "They stay closer to the water supply on top of the hill," she noted.

In addition, Don said having available water in all areas of the pasture has enhanced his rotational grazing system by improving grass management, which in turn has increased the production of the leased stockers that graze his ranch from mid-April to mid-August. "I'm able to get better production out of the cattle and put more gain on them."

Don said due his management practices, he's able to stock slightly heavier than the recommended 2.8 acres of grass per head. In addition to feeding more head of cattle, Don said he was "able to put them in two weeks longer this year" because of the quality and quantity of the grass. "Every way you look at it, it's win-win-win," he said.

As time permits, Don plans to continue to add additional water sources in his pasture. He also plans to preserve the water supply he does have by cutting trees around existing ponds—trees that absorb large amounts of water from the pond. In the future, he also plans to install additional alternative watering sites as recommended by Dale. "I plan to do what Dale suggests by putting in below-pond waterers,"

he said.

Working together to help Don accomplish his goals, Sandy felt all the entities were easy to work with and accommodating. Sandy said Dale was an excellent resource and he “has a very good rapport with landowners as he is a landowner himself”. “Dale is always willing to share what he knows,” Don said.

Another area of his ranch where Don implemented conservation practices was on his crop ground. He worked with his crop ground tenant to implement no-till and a wheat/soybean rotational cropping. Don is hopeful that these practices will improve water quality by reducing the need for additional fertilizer, and reducing erosion of rich bottom ground.

It was along this same ground that Don was concerned that he was losing streambank where the Little Walnut River runs through his ranch. “Don was alarmed at how much bank was caving in,” Sandy said. Not only was this an issue for Don’s loss of productivity, but he also looked at it from a global perspective. Don said “I’ve been to New Orleans, and I’ve read enough and observed enough to know that the gulf is filling up with topsoil from all over the United States.” Don wanted to slow down the erosion and prevent any more loss of production from the adjacent crop ground.

For both technical and financial assistance, Sandy, on behalf of Don, worked through the State Conservation Commission, the Kansas Alliance for Wetlands and Streams (KAWS) and the Watershed Institute to install rock vanes in the Little Walnut River to help prevent erosion along the stream bank. Since the



Students from El Dorado high volunteering to plant tree seedlings along the bank of the Little Walnut River. The seedling planting was one of the final phases of a streambank stabilization project on Don’s ranch.

Submitted Photo

projects' completion, the amount of erosion has been greatly reduced. In addition to the rock veins, a group of El Dorado High School students planted trees along the bank to hold the soil. “We’ve made great improvements to reduce the erosion,” Don said.

Don sees the need to protect the beauty of the countryside beyond the confines of his own property. Reducing litter and dumpsites along roadsides is an issue Don said he is passionate about. While he often picks up littered items himself, he feels more can be done by visiting with our state lawmakers. “There are laws on the books...however they need to enforce the littering fines.”

Don is motivated to make improvements for his land and community. “I think looking to the future is important,” he said.

The Clean Water Farms –River Friendly Farms Project (CWF-RFFP) is coordinated by the Kansas Rural Center, administered by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, and funded by U.S. EPA Non-point Source Section 319 Program funds.