

CWF Project Profile Jackie Keller

Shawnee County Kansas River Watershed, Mission Creek

Rural Topeka Woman Returns to Manage Family Farm

by Jim French



Jackie Keller returned home to take over her parent's farm but was interested in converting it to organic production methods.

From her vantage on the family farm along Mission Creek west of Topeka, Jackie Keller is no stranger to the issues of the wider world. In fact, the work and interests that led her from San Francisco to Salina and back to rural Shawnee County all inform the dreams Keller has for this land.

Jackie Keller first moved to the farm as a youngster in 1973, when her

Water Quality Concerns:

- * Fertilizer and herbicide runoff into Mission Creek;
- * Lack of crop diversity

Best Management Practices Implemented:

- * Implemented an extended legume based crop rotation using organic production methods on 108 acres;
- * Integrated legume cover crops offering more crop diversity to eliminate chemical fertilizer use and control insects and pests.

father, Dean, farmed the ground until putting out his last wheat crop in fall of 2001. Keller admits that in the early years her interests centered more on horses than on agriculture. "Out here, I grew up on a horse, and I still use this skill," she said. While there are no horses on the property now, Keller teaches riding at a local stable.

Keller's university education started her thinking about farming on her own. "While working on my Master's in International Relations, I studied the Cuban organic farming movement that developed after the U.S. trade embargo was put into place," she observed.

From there she became increasingly interested in organic and sustainable agriculture. Upon graduating, she worked for the San Francisco Department of Agriculture on Integrated Pest Management. "The IPM movement started there and is a strategy to reduce pesticides in a farming system," said Keller.

After her education and work in California, Keller accepted a Development Associate position at the Land Institute in Salina -- "a step closer to returning home." Like her experience in California, Keller also gained agricultural perspective in her new setting. Only this time, she saw first-hand the experiments in natural systems agriculture underway at the institute.

Close observation and whole-farm planning. While Keller's background may have formed her interests and intentions for the farm, her close observations of the land indicated the specific direction she would take. Keller's farm includes approximately 190 acres with 108 acres in crops and forages, 77 acres in timber, and a farmstead that takes up the remainder.

Soon after returning to the Topeka area, Keller contacted the Kansas Rural Center and inquired about the Clean Water Farms Project (CWFP). "I was concerned about the soil erosion that I saw," said Keller. She observed the runoff moving directly into Mission Creek carrying both soil and nutrients.

With the assistance of Ed Reznicek, CWFP field coordinator, Keller worked through the River Friendly Farm Plan, a whole-farm assessment tool. This process led her to apply for cost-share on implementing an extended crop rotation. The rotation that Keller and Reznicek worked out will integrate legume cover crops, and reduce dependence and runoff from conventional



Jackie Keller (in white in center of photo) spoke to a workshop at the Kansas Sustainable Agriculture Roundup in February 2004 on her farming practices and water quality.

fertilizers and herbicides. Through the project and the continuous CRP program, she is also rehabilitating and expanding a grass buffer between her fields and Mission Creek.

Crop rotations to organic certification. A typical rotation on one of the fields would include wheat, red clover, grain sorghum, and soybeans. Keller drilled wheat last October on one of the fields. Then, in mid-February she drilled red clover. Depending on the stand and growth of the clover, Keller might take a hay crop. Next spring, after turning under the clover for green manure she will plant milo. The field will produce soybeans the next summer before being drilled again to wheat in the fall.

Another planned rotation for an adjoining field will have oats and sweet clover one year, followed by corn, then followed by soybeans, then returned to oats and sweet clover. All of Keller's rotations exclude use of synthetic

fertilizers. "I am currently working to meet organic certification requirements," said Keller.

This transition will take three years to complete. However, it will allow her to meet her water quality goals, as well as qualify her crops for a premium market.

Keller received approval and cost-share for her CFWP farm plan in March of 2002. Some of the alfalfa on the farm could qualify for organic certification this year, and the remaining fields would complete transition in the next two years.

She intends to use this time to good advantage. Currently, she works closely with the Eastern Kansas Chapter of the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA). Keller states that this grower-run organization inspects, enforces standards, and certifies organically grown crops and produce. Even though she won't be eligible for certification yet, she must follow the same standards and go through inspection during the transition period.

Her long-term plans include more than crops. Keller says she hopes to integrate livestock into a cropping and forage pattern. Keller's family also owns pasture in the Flint Hills, and livestock such as cattle and meat goats could better incorporate all of the land resources available to her.