

## CWF FARMER PROFILE: Mel Williams

### Jefferson County Kansas River Watershed Stranger Creek

By Connie Pantle



*Mel Williams explains details of the SARE grant that he and his family recently conducted on their Jefferson County farm.*

*Photo by Jerry Jost*

*Lawrence, Kans.*—The rain pattered on the roof of Mel Williams’ tin building while nearly 30 people gathered inside for the start of the farm tour at MJ Ranch, a 520 acre cattle ranch in southeastern Jefferson County on Wednesday, September 28.

Mel, and his son Mark, took the opportunity to explain some of the changes the family plans to make on the ranch. Over the next year, Mel envisions MJ Ranch’s transition to alternative agricultural practices in addition to becoming a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) certified organic producer. “It is a lot more work,” but according to Mel it is worth it. Mel is concerned with the negative effects of chemicals and other practices. “I want to preserve the land better,” he said.

One of Mel’s main concerns on his ranch is water quality. Because of this concern, Mel and his wife Joyce completed the River Friendly Farm Environmental Assessment through the Kansas Rural Center’s Clean Water Farms Project (CWFP). The RFFP assessment helped Mel determine the goals of the farm, as well as its strengths and weaknesses. “It makes you think about what you’re doing, while you’re doing it,” he said.

#### **Water Quality Concerns:**

- Fence cattle from pond
- Improve vegetation in pastures
- Clean up trash dumped by previous owners

#### **Best Management Practices Implemented:**

- Fenced pond, installed automatic waterer below pond for cattle to drink
- Implemented management intensive grazing program

Because of some of the priorities that stood out while completing the notebook, Mel then decided to apply for a cost-share grant through KRC’s RFF-CWFP. One of Mel’s goals was to prevent the cattle from lingering in the pond. Fencing the pond alleviates the contamination of the water as well as shore erosion. In order to provide the cattle a drinking source, Mel installed an automatic waterer below the dam of the pond. According to Mel the cattle seem to do better drinking the clean water coming from the waterers. Jerry Jost, KRC field organizer who assisted Mel with the CWF project said, “Since cattle prefer drinking from a tank over a

flowing stream, their placement of waterers in paddocks draws livestock away from drinking in streams.”

During the tour, Mel and Mark also reviewed the test results of the sustainable agriculture practices experiment they conducted on their farm over the last two years. The experiment was conducted using a North Central Sustainable Agriculture Research and Extension (SARE) producer grant. This grant enabled the family to test other practices and determine if they would have enough hay using these practices.

A 50 acre plot was divided into four 12.1 acre tracts and labeled as plots A, B, C, and D. Plot A was fertilized by applying Chilean nitrate at 10 gallons per acre. Plot B was fertilized by seeding hairy vetch as a cover crop using a no-till drill at approximately 20 pounds per acre. Plot C was fertilized by seeding alfalfa as a cover crop using a no-till drill at approximately 10 pounds per acre. Plot D was fertilized by seeding red clover as a cover crop using a no-till drill at approximately 20 pounds per acre. Two control plots of brome, which had been treated with 30-10-0 fertilizer, were also monitored.

Tests were then conducted on the four test plots as well as the control plots. The results showed that while the fields treated with conventional fertilization yielded more bales per acre, the crude protein and relative feed value were higher in bales from all four test plots. Costs per bale from each of the methods were also compared. According to Mel’s figures using 2005 costs, the plot where Chilean nitrate was applied averaged \$7.40 per bale; the hairy vetch averaged \$5.15 per bale; the alfalfa averaged \$2.30 bale, and the red clover averaged \$4.42 per bale. The traditional bales averaged \$10.70 per bale. Mel expects the cost on the hairy vetch, alfalfa and red clover to be reduced next year as these legumes will reseed to some degree without replanting. Jerry Jost, along with David Hallauer, Jefferson County K-State Research and Extension Agent assisted the Williams family



*Joyce Williams discusses the techniques she uses to direct market the family’s grass fed beef.*

*Photo by Jerry Jost*



*Mark Williams explains the how a 50 acre field was dividing into four, 12.1 acre plots. A different technique was applied to each plot, then tested.*

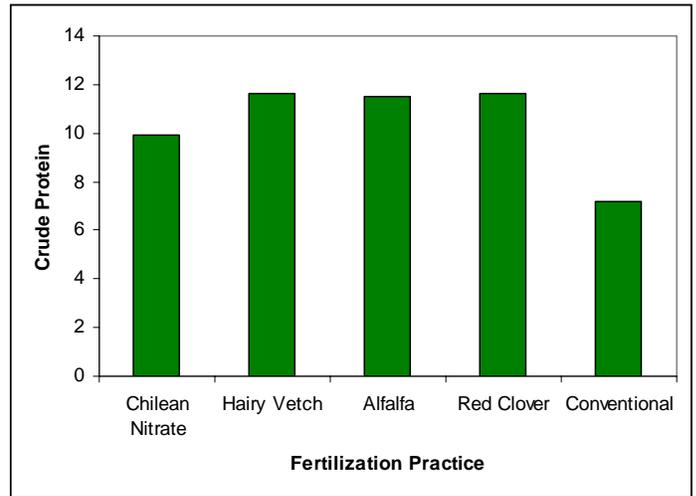
*Photo by Jerry Jost*

with the grant and its testing. During a brief break in the rain those attending pond and cross-fencing for his management intensive grazing program (MIG). The fencing allows Mel to rotate his cows from pasture-to-pasture every two to three days preventing over grazing. “A key to protecting water downstream is keeping the soil covered with vegetation and plant residue. The Williams do a good job managing good pasture cover,” Jerry said.

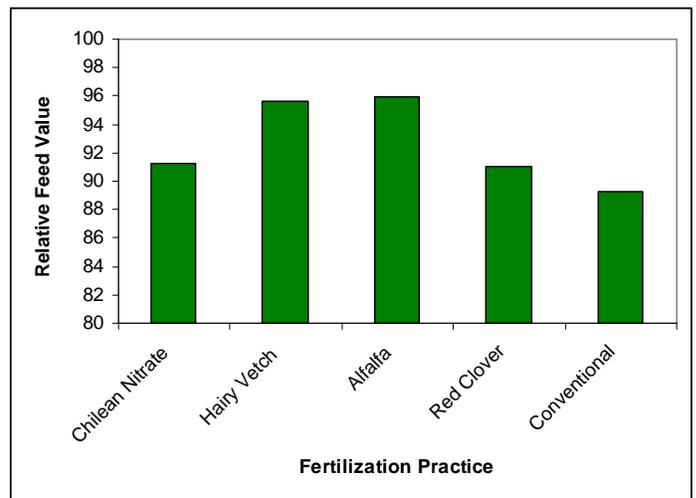
Another method Jerry said the Williams family uses to reduce run-off is unrolling round bales on winter pastures. “This helps spread livestock manure where it needed to improve soil fertility. Keeping livestock on winter pastures and out of feedlots, which too often are placed near streams, reduces manure runoff into streams,” Jerry said.

The Williams herd consists of 56 brood cows and their calves. Mel said that he raises cattle because he enjoys being around the animals. “I like seeing new life born,” he added. Each year, the family keeps at least half a dozen calves, which are grass fed and direct marketed to customers. According to Joyce, “the market (for natural beef) is there.” The product is considered natural, pasture or grass-fed beef and will soon be certified organic. “It is unique that we can do both,” Joyce said.

Mel said he hopes his attention to fertilization using legumes, hay quality, and water quality will set an example for those attending the tour as well as other farmers. “I hope we give them some ideas,” he said.



*A chart illustrating how each test plot, as well as the conventionally fertilized plot, compared in crude protein.*



*A chart illustrating how each test plot, as well as the conventionally fertilized plot, compared in relative feed value.*