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INCREASING HERD PERFORMANCE AND HEALTH HELPS BOTTOM LINE AND ENVIRONMENT

By Connie Pantle

Frankfort, Kansas—"Here in Eastern Kansas, we're blessed with the amount of forages we can grow—and we have to work to select the forages we can use," explained Gary Kilgore, Professor Emeritus, Kansas State University, at a recent "Improving Livestock Production Workshop" workshop in Frankfort.

"Match the system to the animal," he said. "Your goal as a livestock person is to match the requirements of the animal to the available forage."

Kilgore suggested selecting forages "best adapted to your farm's soil and climate." He said an effectively managed forage-based system is cheaper than putting up hay. "Grazing is less-costly if the nutritional needs of your animal are met." He said a producer should utilize both warm and cool season grasses as well as the method of stockpiling forages to meet the animals' requirements year-round.

The result, he explained, is good animal performance and improved water quality due to adequate ground cover to control erosion and trap nutrients. "Think about the water quality aspect—there is no better protection than growing grass," Kilgore said.

Over 50 people attended the "Improving Livestock Production Workshop" on April 13, which was sponsored by Middle Kansas Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy (WRAPS); Tuttle Creek WRAPS; Kansas State University Research and Extension; Jackson and Pottawatomie County Conservation Districts, and the Kansas Rural Center.

Dale Kirkham, field organizer with the Kansas Rural Center's Clean Water Farms Project (CWFP) referred to the evening's catered meal and asked if cows were being catered. "Are we going to cater to their needs?" he asked. "Let four legs and a rumen do the harvesting," Kirkham suggested. He said the cow's rumen is designed to graze and break down fibrous materials.

Kirkham said a producer should think of ways to make a positive impact on the landscape while improving herd production and health. He said allowing the animals to graze year-round improves herd health by avoiding reduced gain due to mud; reduces occurrence of scours, and

reduced stable fly population. It also improves water quality by controlling erosion and compaction, and distributing minerals across the landscape, he said.

Jason Schmidt, CWFP field organizer, explained the services available through the Kansas Rural Center in connection with WRAPS. He said the components of the CWFP include: the River Friendly Farm Plan (RFFP) Environmental Assessment; limited cost-share funding, and grazing information and education.

According to Schmidt, the RFFP, which is voluntary and confidential, helps a farmer establish priorities on the farm. "It helps you decide what to tackle first," he said. He said the CWFP can also connect producers with technical assistance to implement best management practices (BMPs) which improve water quality.

Barbara Donovan, Coordinator of the Tuttle Creek WRAPS, explained the WRAPS program is a volunteer program that works with residents "to protect our water and soil." She said a cost-share program is currently available to residents of the watershed with an extended deadline of June 1. For more information on the cost-share program, please contact Donovan at 651-247-8292 or email her at donovanmn@aol.com.

Will Boyer, Watershed Specialist with Kansas University Research and Extension, said it is important to the bottom line of an operation to have an adequate supply of clean drinking water. "Reduced water consumption equals reduced feed consumption," he said.

"I'm not telling you to fence your streams out, instead look at developing another water source," he said. He said, if possible, one should develop a water source in an underutilized portion of the pasture. Boyer also urged graziers to think about ways to improve grazing distribution in a pasture by strategic placement of mineral feeders, fly rub or gates.

Dr. Larry Hollis, Extension Beef Veterinarian with Kansas State University, presented a spring health calendar for cattle herds—includes are pre-breeding shots that build immunity to prevent Lepto-Vibrio, abortions and non-bred cows, as well as protection from scours in newborn calves. Hollis prefers modified vaccine over killed for improved immunity; as long as the cows are not pregnant when the vaccine is administered. Calves should be vaccinated, dehorned, and castrated prior to being sent to grass. He also recommended checking herd bulls and having semen evaluated. After such a harsh winter, Hollis said the occurrence of frost-bite on a bull's scrotum can lead to the inability to breed.

He also suggested marking cows that are in poor body condition, weaning their calves early and culling them from the herd. "This saves bull power," he said.

Hollis said to use caution when buying used bulls due to trichomoniasis or "trich". Trich is a venereal disease in cattle that causes infertility and may cause cows to abort. He said many states require testing for trich when importing an out-of-state bull, however Kansas does not. Hollis suggested talking to a veterinarian about the history of the bull to see if testing for the disease is necessary.

Hollis also provided suggestions for marketing "value-added" cattle. Hollis said to start with the end in mind. He said to ask: "What do customers want to buy?" He suggested adding value to your calves by using better genetics; a uniform breed type, and a shorter breeding season to develop a group of calves that are uniform in color, size and build. He said cattle buyers are willing to pay a premium for calves that look like "peas in a pod."

Hollis also suggested maintaining health records and weaning calves well ahead of the sale date as he said buyers are willing to pay a premium for healthy, weaned cattle that are broke to a waterer and bunk.

According to KRC's Mary Howell, CWFPP field organizer, who organized the program, producers from seven Kansas watersheds and two other states were in attendance. "Extending the grazing season improves water quality—which results in increased herd performance and health. In the end, it all translates into improved livestock production and ties directly into the producer's bottom line," Howell said.

Financial support for the program came from the Kansas Rural Center via the Kansas Department of Health and Environment with U.S. EPA 319 Funds, with other support from the Jackson and Pottawatomie County Conservation Districts, and Middle Kansas and Tuttle Creek WRAPS.