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Conservation is an On-going Effort: Stuenkel Tour Highlights Multiple Practices and Projects

By Tom Parker

"I'm not sure we're going to beat the rain," Lucinda Steunkel said.

Light bled from the sky as clouds thickened into a solid gray mass. An icy wind gusted from the south as 34 visitors piled into an open-air trailer, bundled in jackets, slickers, ponchos and heavy coats. As the trailer pulled away from the yard to begin its journey through Lucinda and Sheila Steunkel's farm on the Washington-Clay County border, the first drops of water pelted the group.

Steunkel's fears were well grounded. By the time the group jounced through a pasture to park beside a small creek, rain had begun falling in earnest. If anything, though, it accentuated the measures the Steunkels had taken to mitigate runoff and erosion on the farm's draws and creeks through check dams, sediment basins and rock chutes, as well as other ongoing measures for more efficient cattle and pasture management. It wasn't just about conservation, it was about making the land work to its utmost efficiency and, as owners of the property, to be the best stewards possible.

The visitors were there to see how Steunkel and her sister-in-law, Sheila, (and, before their deaths in a collision one year ago, their husbands, Daryl and Kevin, respectively) had tapped into resources from various agencies and organizations to create what one visitor would afterward claim to be "pure genius."

Joining the Stuenkel's were Will Boyer, K-State Watershed Specialist, Dale Strickler, a cover crop expert from Star Seed, Inc., and Thad Rhodes, Kansas Forest Service. All were instrumental in what Steunkel admitted was an ongoing effort. The tour, held Monday, Nov. 7, was sponsored by the Tuttle Creek Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategies (WRAPS), River Valley Extension District, Washington and Clay Counties NRCS and Conservation Districts, and the Kansas Rural Center - Clean Water Farms/WRAPS Project.

The trailer stopped at the head of a wooded gully. A shallow ravine trickled out of a grassy field, shallow at first but quickly eroding to a deep trench. "If you don't take care of the land," Steunkel said, "it'll go away—and I don't mean just financially."

After watching valuable topsoil sluice off the fields in heavy rains, she contacted NRCS District Conservationist, Dee Minge, who suggested the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and State Conservation grants. NRCS Engineers Lee Wilson and Andy Broxterman designed a rock armor where the creek first entered the property. Beneath the rock was laid a thick liner of geotextile fabric.

"There are two different reasons for using the fabric," Boyer said. "The first is to create a separation between the rock and the mud to keep traffic from pushing the rock down into the mud, and, along the banks and upper slopes it keeps water from undermining the rock." A series of NRCS-designed check dams at inlets to the creek slows the force of the water and allows sediment to build to level out the incline, Boyer said.

Another method of reducing topsoil depletion was the use of cover crops. The pasture was lush with a tillage radish whose foliage remained green and leafy. Besides reducing weed growth and retaining soil moisture, its taproot extended through the hardpan for up to three feet. Cattle love the greens and, later in the season, the taproot. "You'll see cattle with a lump in their cheek like a farmer chewing tobacco," Steunkel said. "More than just food, though, the

cover crop keeps the soil pliable. We have hard clay here, and in summer it turns to brick. The sun also kills micronutrients, so we have to keep the soil covered at all times to preserve the fertility.”

Many farmers complain that the use of cover crops robs moisture from tilled crops, Strickler said. “They do use a small amount of moisture,” he said. “But so does evaporation.” When combined with no-till planting, roots have ready holes through the hardpan to sink deep into the soil, he said. Another benefit is added nitrogen to the soil through the use of legume cover crops such as chicory vetch, which the cattle like to graze as well.

The use of cover crops isn’t new, Strickler said, but dates back at least to Pliny the Elder in the 1st century who wrote a book on the subject. “What is new,” he said, “is marrying no-till to cover crops. We’re still finding out how well it works, but it goes back to the old saying that no matter what kind of problem you have with the soil, the answer is always organic matter.”

Blending modern technological methods with time-proven techniques extended beyond the use of cover crops. Steunkel divided the farm into nine paddocks combining native prairie, expired CRP land, and crop ground. Each paddock contains its own watering station, some of which are insulated tanks regulated by float valves. Cattle are rotated between the paddocks depending on season and climate.

“By moving the cattle every three to five days through nine paddocks,” she said, “we were able to get two to three times as much grass utilization as we had by letting them roam freely.” One of the tricks was to rotate them to pastures with shade when temperatures reached triple digits. “We learned to listen to what the cows were telling us,” she said. “Another benefit was that the cattle were healthier because they weren’t laying down on old manure packs.”

The use of paddocks also facilitates the Sandhills calving method of separating newborn calves from older calves (older calves are disease magnifiers according to K-State veterinarian Dr. Hollis) and pregnant cows to reduce the risk of scours. Steunkel is now working with Rhodes to create windbreaks to shelter cattle in wintertime—a long -term project, but then, none of the improvements happened overnight.

“It all started with Mary Howell and a notebook,” Steunkel said.

The notebook was a checklist and scorecard entitled “Clean Water Farms—River Friendly Farm Environment Assessment” from the Kansas Rural Center. Steunkel found the notebook at a Kansas Grazers Association meeting in January, 2006, where she also met Howell. She immediately recognized its merit. “We were already doing many of the things the notebook advocated,” she said, “but it helped bring it all together. It clarified everything.”

Besides that, the program paid her to fill out the survey. She and her husband became passionately involved in reworking their farm into a model of efficiency, sometimes completing five-year projects in a single year.

After losing her husband a year ago, Steunkel’s goal hasn’t changed. If anything, there’s a stronger bond to the land and the memories it holds. “This has become a memorial tribute to my wonderful husband,” Steunkel said. “I’m going to continue to carry out his dreams and aspirations.”

Following the tour, visitors retired to a steel barn where guest speakers tried vainly to speak above the rain drumming the roof. A meal catered by Ricky’s of Hanover warmed them up before venturing back out into the rain.

For more information on the Clean Water Farms—River Friendly Farm Environment Assessment from the KRC, contact Mary Howell at 785-562-8726 or e-mail her at marshallcofair@gmail.com. For more information on the Tuttle Creek WRAPS Program contact Barbara Donovan at DonovanMN@aol.com or 651-247-8292.