

Onto Greener Pastures with Rotational Grazing and Cover Crops



Meet Ron Bula

Ron Bula began his career working as an agricultural finance advisor. As any investment advisor will tell you, diversity is key, and Ron’s farming advice is no different. Ron manages the land keeping the ideals of conservation and economics close at hand. Running a small farm comes with its own set of challenges, and Ron strives to maximize the potential of each acre by expanding forage and grazing varieties on his land.



Ron will keep one of his existing fields in the pre-existing crop/forage rotation without grazing. Another field will be planted with the three-stage cover crop rotation, with grazing incorporated.

“Rotational grazing allows me to make the most out of a limited number of acres.”

-RON BULA

The Demonstration Details

Ron wants to see how his production changes and what economic benefits he can achieve, by focusing on cattle grazing and adopting a multiple cover crop per year rotation. Similar to relay cropping methods, a cover crop mix will be planted, grazed by cattle, then no-till seeded with the next mix using a three-stage rotation: spring, summer, and fall.

The Bottom Line

Ron hopes to obtain data that shows that pasture management may cost more initially, but this investment is recovered through the benefits to livestock and soil health, as well as increased biomass production. Ron is looking forward to seeing how integrating cover crops into his pasture changes the biology of his farm’s soil.

Soil health sampling sites will be established and monitored closely in similar landscape positions of both fields to quantify soil health parameters. Biomass samples will be taken pre- and post-grazing to analyze the forage volume that is being provided by this innovative and intensive management system.



PROJECT OVERVIEW

While cover crop acreage is increasing, grazing them is not a common practice. Combining these management options can improve soil health, increase cost efficiency, and reduce nutrient runoff. By providing conservation guidance and motivation to graziers, this education and outreach project led by Sand County Foundation, will demonstrate the value of rotational grazing with cover crops. The goal is to expand cover crop acreage with rotational grazing across the Midwest for a more resilient agricultural system.



DEMONSTRATION APPROACH

Four experienced graziers will demonstrate new methods, share their experiences, and communicate the outcomes, with assistance from Sand County Foundation and the University of Wisconsin. The primary goals are to build awareness and confidence among livestock farmers to rotationally graze cover crops.



FARMER LEADERSHIP

The project's participating graziers are members of the Sauk Soil and Water Improvement Group. SSWIG is amongst the growing number of farmer-led groups to receive grant support from the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.



Bula's Pleasant Valley Farm

of Sauk County, Wisconsin

FAMILY:

Ron and his wife, Maureen, live on a sustainably-operated, 160-acre farm nestled in the beautiful bluffs of Baraboo, Wisconsin. Their agricultural adventure began in 1993, as their family started to grow and they wanted to know where their food came from and how it was grown. It continues to be important for them to share high-quality, healthy food with their community. Both of Ron's children, Patrick and Justine, have dedicated their career to conservation.



CROPS:

They produce organic vegetables including multiple varieties of potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, onions, leeks, eggplants, broccoli, swiss chard, beets, squash, kohlrabi, and more.

LIVESTOCK:

They raise their livestock naturally, without antibiotics or growth hormones, on 60 acres of pasture. In addition to about 75 cattle, they graze 25-30 sheep, 100 laying hens and 300 broilers. They also raise 20-25 pigs (Berkshire pork).

MANAGEMENT:

Their pastures are intensively managed, which includes rotating sheep and chickens daily. In order to maximize productivity over such a limited area, Ron also rotates the cattle daily, with each paddock remaining ungrazed for up to a month between rotations. It is easier and more efficient to graze living cover rather than provide bales. Ron first became familiar with cover crops and their benefits as a kid growing potatoes; since those days he has adopted cover crops into his own operation.

FOR MORE PROJECT INFORMATION VISIT:

Sand County Foundation

www.sandcountyfoundation.org/RotationalGrazing