

Missouri farmers sue Corps over flooding *see Page 3*

Improve beef cattle genetics to improve value *see Page 5*

A 3-D look at boosting soil health *see Page 19*



TRIAL RUN: Looking for a way to improve soil health while adding value to cattle, the Forck family turned to grazing corn stover and cover crops. Keith Forck (from left), along with father Pee Wee, Lincoln University agronomist Todd Higgins and brother Kelly, are conducting a commercial-scale cover-crop study at Forck Farms near Jefferson City.

Cooperative research

By **MINDY WARD**

It was a harsh growing season for cover crops in Missouri. Late seeding coupled with lack of rain and early cold weather impacted growth. For many livestock producers wanting to glean the added forage off cropland, the potential tonnage was just not there. Still, Forck Farms of Cole County pressed on, determined to see if cattle could maintain or even gain weight grazing cover crops and corn stover.

The Forcks — brothers Kelly and Keith, along with their father, Mike “Pee Wee” Forck — are working with researchers at

Lincoln University and the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service on a project that analyzes gains in steers and heifers using different cover-crop mixes.

“It is truly a unique project in that it looks at cover-crop grazing on a commercial scale,” says Todd Higgins, a Lincoln University research agronomist,

“Our goal is to gain pounds per animal unit while trying to improve the soil in a no-till environment,” Kelly explains.

The plan

The grazing project incorporates roughly 400 acres of corn and soybean ground in

the Missouri River bottoms. When the project first started in 2012, the Forcks seeded four different cover-crop blends.

The project flourished. “It was ideal cover-crop growing conditions in 2012,” says Higgins. “We were able to get the cover crops on, and they received timely rains. We saw a lot of growth.” The result — steers and heifers had up to a 2-pound-per-day gain on cover crops and cornstalks.

However, as so many farmers know, things can change in just a year.

Different year, different results

Last month, the cattle were just coming

off the cover crop and corn stover, so data have not been analyzed for the 2013-14 trials. However, Higgins says it will be like comparing “apples to crabapples.” The cover-crop growth was just not as robust as in winter 2012.

Being able to look at data from a number of years and under a variety of growing conditions can only help cattle producers determine if grazing cover crops and corn stover is economically feasible. The Forcks will continue the project into 2015.

■ Learn the benefits the Forcks saw grazing cover crops in stover on Page 4.

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MISSOURI NEWS SCENE

Cover crops add beef value

By MINDY WARD

WHEN corn yields started breaking the 200-bushel-per-acre barrier, Kelly Forck found more crop residue in his fields. For no-till crop farmers there is value to residue — it is a primary source of organic matter added to the soil.

Kelly, along with his brother Keith and father, Mike “Pee Wee” Forck, began looking for ways to manage crop residue to allow for the greatest improvement to the soil, while adding value to the farm. The family sought to enhance their winter grazing program by adding feed sources to the cornstalks.

Hearing the industry buzz over grazing cover crops intrigued the family, so they decided to give the farming practice a try.

“Our goal was to gain pounds per animal unit while trying to improve soil in a no-till environment,” Kelly says.

Working with Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Forck Farms set up a commercial-scale, cover-crop grazing trial on its land in Cole County.

Tried and tested

In September 2012, the Forcks aerially seeded cover crops into 235 acres of corn. They seeded winter oats and turnips on 126 acres, and rye and crimson clover on the remaining acres. After soybean harvest, they drilled an additional 168 acres with oats and Austrian winter peas. They broadcast 75 acres of corn and 75 acres of beans into a wheat and barley mix.

After harvesting corn the first week of November, they turned the cattle into the field of oats and turnip. Cattle were weighed before placing them on the field.

The initial cover provided 27 days of forage for both steers and heifers. Then they were pulled off and weighed again, and then moved to the rye and crimson clover fields.

Cattle were once again weighed on and off the field. The Forcks were able to glean 34 days of grazing from the rye and crimson clover fields before moving to the wheat and barley field for another 36 days of grazing. Unfortunately, the family was not able to graze the Austrian winter pea and



FINDING SOLUTIONS: The Forcks are working with Lincoln University on a cover-crop grazing trial at Forck Farms in Cole County. Here, Keith Forck (left) talks over the loading process with Kelly Forck, Pee Wee Forck and Lincoln University agronomist Todd Higgins.

oat trial, due to poor plant development.

However, according to Todd Higgins, a Lincoln University research agronomist, average daily gains for the remaining three trials were all positive.

“That year we saw 2½ pounds of gain per day on some treatments,” he says. “The rye and crimson clover was the lowest at 1½ pounds of gain per day. And that was in the middle of winter in snow cover, with cold temperatures. But we were still able to put on pounds.”

The results were enough to make the Forck family try sowing cover crops in corn stover again.

New year, new approach

In 2013, the family sowed five different blends. They tried turnips in soybeans and

added free-choice protein blocks. The family also created permanent water structures.

“It is a work in progress,” Kelly says. “At the end of the day we are trying to create value. We are trying to raise forage products in the winter, add value to the cattle

by putting on pounds, add value to the soil and decompose crop residue.”

How to assess that value is the question. “How do you value more organic matter in the field, which can raise water-holding capacity of the soil?” he asks.

As an agronomist, Higgins’ interest is soil health and economic gains off of land over an extended period of time.

“I am looking for a 12-month management strategy for our soils, not just the 4 to 6 months that the corn and soybeans are in the ground,” he says.

“We can use the land and make it more productive year-round with farming practices like cover crops.”



SUSTAINING THE SOIL: Lincoln University research agronomist Todd Higgins (left) wants farmers to look at a 12-month soil management strategy to improve soil health.



ROLL IT UP: Trying to keep down the cost of the fencing system, Kelly Forck (left) explains to his dad, Pee Wee, just how the operation rolls up wire. Kelly designed the wire roller to be portable, using the power from the tractor to roll up hundreds of feet of electric fence.



ADDING POUNDS: Grazing corn stover with cover crops is adding pounds to calves at Forck Farms in Cole County.