



Profile from the Field

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Big Bluestem Management Using High Density/Short Duration Grazing

Project Title: Big Bluestem Management Using High Density/Short Duration Grazing
Coordinator: Leslea and Brad Hodgson

Location: Fountain, Minnesota
SARE Grant: \$5,907
Duration: 2010-2013

To read the full project report, go to www.sare.org/projects and search for project number FNC10-842.

Big Bluestem is a warm season, perennial bunchgrass with blue-green stems four to eight feet tall. It has been referred to as “ice cream for cows.”

Leslea and Brad Hodgson own and operate Root Prairie Galloways, where they raise Galloway beef cows and have big bluestem pastures that they want to protect from the encroachment of weeds into the bare areas between the grass clumps. In 2010, they received an NCR-SARE Farmer Rancher grant for \$5,907 to experiment with techniques to control the gradual invasion of unwanted cool season grasses and to establish two prairie legumes native to the pasture for added nitrogen in the soil.

They set up a study to learn what effect a hard early spring graze on the dormant bluestem pasture would have on the existing and invading cool season grasses and forbs. Fencing and waterlines were installed to facilitate rotational grazing. Seeds of Illinois bundle flower and Purple prairie clover were broadcast onto the pasture to increase nitrogen levels.

The cattle were moved onto the bluestem pasture and through paddocks that measured from approximately 50' x 100' to 60' x 100'. They adjusted the time the cattle spent in a paddock based on the amount of forage available for the cows. They varied their grazing pressure from 50,000 lbs./ac. the first year, to 181,000 lbs./ac. in year two.

As their project wrapped up, the Hodgsons reported that the grazing techniques and management that they used led to improved yields of the warm season grasses, in particular big bluestem. They also noted that the amount of duff and litter decreased significantly through the period of the study, as did the bare soil areas, which signaled to them that the plant community became more vigorous and the plant stand thicker.

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