



Building a productive pasture

With NRCS rotational grazing plan and EQIP assistance, Pope County beef producer improves forage on former CRP enrollment, anticipates water-quality benefits

VILLARD —Jennifer Olson is building up a herd of beef cattle as she works with the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service to develop a more productive pasture on the Pope County farm where she grew up.

“Our end goal here is farm-raised beef. We’ll do some farm-to-fork eventually,” Olson said.

She introduced British whites to the Charolais-Angus mix, selecting animals that exhibit a docile temperament and finish well on grass. She’ll add diversity to the brome grass-dominated pasture, land previously enrolled in



the federal Conservation Reserve Program.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) assistance from NRCS will

offset the cost of fencing the 155-acre pasture, installing a watering system, and seeding 4.2 acres with a native plant mix. As a

Top: Jennifer Olson is converting former CRP land into a rotationally grazed pasture for the herd of beef cattle she is gradually building. She raises Charolais-Angus crosses and a few British whites, selecting animals with mild temperament.

Left: Jennifer and James Olson have fenced nearly 5,000 feet of the perimeter of the 155 acres they are converting to rotationally grazed paddocks in Pope County. EQIP assistance from NRCS will offset some of the cost.

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Jennifer Olson is one of two women in Pope County who are the primary NRCS grazing contract-holders. She's worked with Melissa Behrens of the Pope County NRCS office, which handles about 20 active NRCS grazing contracts. Women are involved in most family farming operations even if they don't serve as the primary contract-holder.



beginning farmer, Olson, who recently took over the operation, qualifies for slightly higher payment rates.



Behrens



Duchene

interior fencing.

The finished pasture will contain 20 rotationally grazed paddocks, more than 1 mile of buried water pipeline and nine shared water tanks.

Rotational grazing results in more lush, green grass with well-developed root systems that help to stifle weeds. By keeping cattle out of streams, water systems address water quality and erosion concerns.

Olson's is one of about 20 active grazing contracts in Pope County, where NRCS soil conservation technician Melissa Behrens works with producers to improve pasture.

"So much of the land is either in production or it's in CRP. We had to better manage

the pastures and grassland we had. I think that's where some of this came from, is there's a shortage of land for grazing producers," Behrens said.

Throughout Pope County, 2,860 acres were enrolled in NRCS grazing contracts in 2020.

Perham-based NRCS regional grazing specialist Jeff Duchene worked with Olson on her rotational grazing plan.

Recycling the nutrients tied up in dead plant litter on CRP land sitting idle for several years can take time. Productivity will improve once native grasses and forbs take hold, and as the cattle spread seeds while they graze.

"The idea is to get some cool-season native grasses

“ Managing the cattle is my passion. As far as marketing, breeding, veterinary care — all of that is kind of my wheelhouse. We're a team. We do it together. But the cattle are primarily my operation. ”

— Jennifer Olson, Pope County beef producer

for early in the season, and then some native warm-season grasses, and then add some forbs for diversity and hopefully make some habitat for native pollinators and other wildlife,” Duchene said.

For the 4.2-acre native prairie seeding, Duchene suggested adding to those cool- and warm-season grasses a legume-heavy mix of forbs —including purple prairie clover, white prairie clover and Canada milk vetch — plus golden Alexander, Maximillian sunflower and long-headed coneflower.

“Ultimately, with grazing management they should be able to build productivity over time on the pasture. In general, with a well-managed pasture you’ll have virtually no soil erosion if you maintain good ground coverage in the pasture, and very little runoff. A well-managed pasture will soak up virtually all the rainfall,” Duchene said.

Olson will receive about \$59,500 in NRCS reimbursements.

“Without NRCS assistance we probably would have still completed this project,” Olson said, “but it would



The herd includes Jennifer Olson’s cattle and her mother’s cattle. Eventually, Olson plans to take over the entire operation as her mother transitions to retirement.

have taken us a lot longer to accomplish. We would have been looking more at a 10-year to a 15-year plan vs. a five-year plan. So it allowed us to move forward a lot faster, and thus benefiting water quality and environmental concerns through the rotational grazing.”

The Olsons plan to install the watering system over the next two summers. Meanwhile, Olson continues to improve herd genetics.

“I’ve got grass and I’ve got time,” Olson said.

A breed’s ability to finish well on pasture takes

precedence over fast weight gain.

On a late fall Saturday afternoon, Jennifer strode through the herd, calling some cattle by name, some by number. The tamest nuzzle her outstretched hand. This is what she wants customers to experience.

In 2016, she bought two animals of her own, a pair of crossbred heifers.

“You can pick out a breed. But I think more than that you need to pick out a growing system. I could go buy Angus cows off a ranch in Wyoming and they’re not being raised the same

way I’m raising my cattle, so they’re not going to adapt to that system as well,” Olson said.

A current member of the Glacial Ridge Cattlemen’s Association, Olson grew up showing cattle in the Villard Livewires 4-H Club and participating in Future Farmers of America at Osakis High School. She went on to earn a biology degree from the University of Minnesota Morris.

She sharpened her cattle-judging skills accompanying her father to sales, and then helping to decide which heifers to keep.

“I remember going to a lot of auctions and a lot of sales with Dad through the years, and I was helping pick out bulls and trying to decide which cattle we would keep. He’d ask me, ‘Well, what color should we get this year? Should we try a red one? Should we get a black one?’ Then we’d go shopping and find a bull,” Olson said.

They would watch the cattle, bet on which cows would calve first and analyze traits. Olson became skilled at recognizing family lines.

“We’ve just been kind of



Left: “It’s generally marginal land. There can be some environmental benefit by turning it into pasture as opposed to cropland,” Jeff Duchene, NRCS grazing specialist, said of converting former CRP acreage to pasture. “(T)hey may have livestock but don’t have enough pasture.” **Middle:** Jennifer Olson went back into the pasture with a remote fencer control to check for signs of low voltage. **Right:** “I never remember there not being cattle around. It’s just been different kinds of cattle,” Jennifer Olson said of the farm where she grew up. Her grandparents milked cows. Her parents later raised Holstein springing heifers before they started a beef herd.

building the herd since then and trying to improve a little bit every year and make some gains on quality that way,” Olson said.

As a female farmer, Olson occasionally has encountered veterinarians or sales reps who ask to speak to her husband. James sets them straight. He helps with the cattle, but his primary involvement centers on mechanical work and haying.

“Managing the cattle is my passion,” Olson said. “As far as marketing, breeding, veterinary care — all of that is kind of my wheelhouse. ... We’re a team. We do it together. But the cattle are primarily my operation.”

Olson’s grandmother milked cows alongside her grandfather. By the 1990s, her parents, Deb and Emery Evenson, had gotten out of dairy. They raised Holstein springing heifers for a while, and then started a beef herd. He died a few years ago. Deb Evenson owns half of the current cow-calf pairs; she plans to transition out of the operation as she nears retirement.

“It was just sort of a mixed bunch of whatever we picked up at the time,” Olson said of the herd she had helped her father develop.

Remnants of those mixed beef calves — two Charolais, two Herefords, a couple of Angus, a couple of Simmentals — remain in the current commercial herd.

“Since then, we’ve selected for the cattle that we like being around. I think that there are merits to every breed, and you just have to



James Olson helps with the beef cattle on weekends and after his full-time job in automation manufacturing. Jennifer Olson works full time at the Farm Service Agency.

VIDEO: [The Olsons discuss plans for their beef operation.](#)

“ Our end goal here is farm-raised beef. We’ll do some farm-to-fork eventually. But because we both work full time, we needed an enterprise that we could handle with those jobs in mind. The beef rotational grazing operation just fit really well for us. It’s something we can do after hours and on the weekend. ”

— Jennifer Olson, Pope County beef producer

decide which ones work for you. The basis of our current herd is primarily Charolais and Angus genetics. We like the finishing ability of the Angus, the hardiness and temperament of the Charolais. We’ve selected within those cattle for docility and for type for the structural type cow that we appreciate — not necessarily characteristics of those breeds 100%, but individual animals within our herd that we liked the lines of and have kept.”

They’ll continue to experiment.

Most recently, they’re

watching the line of British white crosses, which could add a smaller animal with a docile temperament. Olson didn’t have anything in particular in mind when she saw the British whites at a bred-cow sale.

“They walked off the trailer into the dry lot, walked around, and then came back to the gate and ate corn out of our hands that first day,” Olson said. “They are super docile, super good mothers, good milkers, they don’t have a lot of size. They’re kind of slow growing. But I’m OK with that. I don’t need them to finish fast, I just need them to finish well.”

Pipelines vs. surface water

Many producers with available surface water don’t see a need for a pipeline system. Melissa Behrens of the Pope County NRCS office points to benefits including increased weight gain, and less erosion and compaction.

“Most people are leery about the pipeline system, and it’s really key to the whole grazing system,” Behrens said. “We have so much surface water available, they think the surface water is just as good as their clean water source.”

Spreading out water sources leads to uniform grazing, which in turn leads to higher quality forage, less compaction and less streambank erosion.

Over the past five years, most new pipelines have been buried 6 feet or deeper, eliminating concerns about lines freezing in winter and giving producers flexibility to graze longer into the fall.



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