

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

UI Extension demonstration project leads to a complete change in ranch operations

AT A GLANCE

Starting with what was learned from an on-farm demonstration, Jerome County beef producers have been able to give up their public land leases and profitably feed their cattle on private land.

The Situation

Jim and Diane Meeks own a ranch in Jerome County. Frustrated with federal regulations and issues associated with grazing on BLM ground they made the decision to let their grazing permits go back to the BLM and bring their cows home permanently. Their private land was committed to rotational crops typical to Jerome County. Traditionally they would bring cattle home and feed them hay all winter before going back out on public ground in the spring. The challenge became how to feed their cattle year-round on the home place and continue to make a profitable living. It was obvious that to avoid feeding hay year-round, an unprofitable practice, they would have to convert crop ground to pasture ground.

Our Response

As part of a larger multi-county NRCS-CIG grant funded project, the Meeks partnered with University of Idaho Extension educators in 2013 & 2014 to begin evaluating cover crops as a potential feed source for their cattle. Cover crop mixes were planted on fields after the grain was harvested with the plan to provide additional feed for cattle in the late fall and winter. UI Extension provided the cover crop seed and the Meeks



Cover crops being drilled into cereal grain stubble on the Meeks ranch in Jerome County.

provided equipment and labor for planting and irrigation.

Program Outcomes

The grant funded project continued for two years. At that time, the Meeks could see the potential for cover crops to provide fall and winter grazing for their cattle, but they still had the problem of providing feed for their herd year-round while farming the ground.

The Meeks used information learned from participating with UI Extension and other sources to begin experimenting with cover crops independently. They decided to transition most of the farm out of crop production and into semi-permanent pasture. They continue to produce alfalfa for some supplemental feeding

and as a cash crop. The rotation on their farm has become pasture and alfalfa.

The Meeks have worked with UI Extension and private company agronomists to develop a method to establish the pastures after alfalfa or improve older pastures. In June, they plant a mix of grazing corn, cover crop species and perennial grasses. The goal is for the corn to maximize growth without going to full maturity. As the green corn freezes, it provides protection from wind and snow for the plants in the understory and the cattle. In the fall, cattle are turned into the pastures and the corn and cover crop provide the fall/winter feed. In the spring, the perennial grasses are established, and the next semi-permanent pasture is in production. Using the grower records from 2020, they indicate their ability to graze rather than feed hay nets them approximately \$1,100/acre grazing 469 cows, calves and bulls, when hay is valued at \$155/ton. The price of hay

fluctuates, but the program the Meeks have developed is profitable, better for their cattle, better for their soil and less stressful for them.

UI Extension educators cannot take all the credit for the success of the Meeks farm, but this project shows how demonstrating an idea can allow a producer to build on that knowledge and improve their situation.

The Future

There are still challenges and one of those is the loss of grazing time while the new pasture is being developed. University of Idaho Extension educators have secured a grant to see if they can increase the summer grazing opportunity without reducing the forage production for the fall/winter grazing. The Meeks are continually working to learn and try new solutions on their farm as they plan for future expansion of their herd.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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