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Grazing on frozen tundra offers lessons

by Whitney Pipkin | Feb 2, 2018

BOONSBORO, Md. (Feb. 6, 2018) — If it works in North Dakota, it can work here, too.

That's Gabe Brown's mantra when he speaks at farming conferences across the country about his approach to raising animals in the frigid landscape of Bismarck, where the temperature is below freezing 223 days of the year.

Brown spoke at a pair of conferences in Maryland this month about raising animals in a way that improves soil health, as he has been doing for more than 20 years.

At the recent Regional Grazing Conference, Brown got into the weeds for an audience of about 170 farmers — regaling them about seed mixes, mob grazing and cover cropping. Those are just a few of the methods he uses to improve the landscape that feeds his farm

business.

The next day, Brown spoke at the annual conference of Future Harvest, Chesapeake Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture in College Park, Md. about how those farming practices can help feed the world and inspire others.

“What do I — a rancher from North Dakota — have in common with producers in this area?” asked Brown. “Soil.”

His diversified farm, Brown’s Ranch, raises cows, lambs, pigs and chickens on 5,000 acres of owned and leased pastures. The family also produces honey and vegetables.

The foundation of the farm business — the variable they measure and invest in the most — is soils, ensuring they are biologically active so they can produce foods Brown says are naturally higher in vitamin and mineral content.

Those soils are also better at storing carbon and water, preventing erosion and pollution to waterways.

Brown acknowledged that farmers in the Chesapeake Bay watershed have made more strides than most to keep soils from running off into the nearest stream, mostly through cover crops, no-till farming and crop rotations.

“Great things have been done in this area, and it’s truly leading the nation and the world on how to heal a watershed,” he said. “But water quality is a bigger and bigger issue, no matter where I go.”

At the grazing conference, audience members also had the chance to learn from local farmers in Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia about their soil health practices.

Keith Ohlinger, who runs Heritage Hill Farm in Howard County, Md., said he is using a diverse mix of plant and animal species to increase his soils’ organic matter by an average of one percentage point per year.

“I want to try to roll back and regenerate the soils, so I can pass it on to my daughters and they can be as profitable as they can,” Ohlinger said.

However, Brown continues to push the envelope for not only preventing soil degradation but also farming in a way that adds organic matter each year.

When he plants cover crops, he throws as many different seeds into the mix as possible, favoring combinations that thrive in symbiotic relationships with one another, such as triticale, hairy vetch and rye.

He’ll plant lentils and daikon radishes just to build the soils; if the cows eat them, too, that’s a bonus.

“In some cases, the cows eat just 15 to 20 percent of the crops, but the rest is trampled

down or left for the winter," where it provides a layer of protection and continues capturing carbon, Brown said. "What we've noticed is, as we advance soil health, we're able to grow things much longer than our neighbors."

He said direct marketing their products has also improved their business.

"We are now profitable every year, because I set my own price," Brown said. "One's ability to do this type of direct market farming is directly related to his understanding of the ecosystem."

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