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Farmers explore forage 'cocktail mixes' for soil health and profitability

CEDAR GROVE, Wis. — Soil health and having multiple species of crops in the soil year-round are two goals at Double Dutch Dairy.

About 50 farmers and community members gathered to learn about alternative forage systems and soil health during a field day Aug. 31 at the farm. The event was sponsored by Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers (SRPF), Sheboygan County Forage Council, Extension Sheboygan County and Midwest Forage Association.

Have you ever wondered what's in what the field day presenters called a forage "cocktail mix"? Members quickly learned it can contain BMR sorghum sudan grass, frosty berseem white clover, hairy vetch and tetilia Italian rye grass. This crop mixture was cut twice this season and Double Dutch planned to take a third cutting.



Brody Stapel, co-owner of Double Dutch Dairy, pointed out that because days are still long enough for growing after the wheat harvest, there's an opportunity to improve soil health by growing an additional crop.

"That's how I encourage people to start. Try something after wheat," Stapel said.

Double Dutch is transitioning 100 percent of its acres to no-till. Time and fuel also are factors in the decision.

"One of the big things for us having started here recently, is that it allows us to rotate," Stapel said. "We don't have a huge land base around the dairy, so we can flip this field every year versus tying it up for three or four years with alfalfa."

Stapel is happy to be achieving a goal of improved soil health and better plant health. This is a result of implementing these conservation practices and adding diversity to the crops. The farm has successfully steered away from the monoculture of pure alfalfa and corn silage.

The group also learned about the benefits of nitrogen credits.

“(It’s) a balance of trying to figure out how hard do we make the corn work to go find the nitrogen versus spoon feeding it. And spoon feeding it is getting expensive. It’s a goal to have the crop grow nitrogen for us. At the end of the day, it’s got to work for the pocketbook,” Stapel said.

Mike Ballweg, University of Wisconsin-Extension crops and soil agent and Sheboygan County Forage Council representative, also shared some take-home messages.

“If you want forage, plant early,” Ballweg said. “Always look at the economics of the system. Plant mid-September and get it established. Early planting will determine the yields for next year.”

Double Dutch’s long-term goal is to plant perennial cover crops and improve diversity in the soil. During a wet growing season, the way healthy soil carries water is second to none. Even though soil microbiology takes time, the organic matter continues to improve.

Field day attendees also looked at feed samples and learned why the farm is doing this over alfalfa. Jake Sehr with Nutrition Professionals shared how higher-fiber digestibility improves animal performance.

“If we are going to harvest these (multiple species) crops, how are we going to make it work for the cows?” Sehr said. “There are some factors on a nutrient basis but a physical basis as well to make different feeds work.”

The relative feed value (RFV) is different between alfalfa and grasses, and Double Dutch feeds a 28 percent starch diet. That much more energy is coming from digestible fiber, Sehr said.

“Feed the rumen bacteria and that feeds the cow,” he said. “It takes a little bit of brain work, but if you feed them right, the cows don’t know the difference. Less feeding cows a bunch of potato chips and feeding them more leafy greens.”

Stapel said it’s paying off. “We really like our components lately.”

The field tour also showcased corn inter-planted with multi-species forage of cowpeas, rapeseed, Italian ryegrass, sorghum-sudan grass, white clover, sun hemp, buck wheat, sunflower and red clover. The farm grew this cocktail mix for the first time last year. The idea was to try different varieties in sections of the field with 30,000 population down to 24,000 population. Stapel said there are a lot more questions than answers at this point, such as: How does it ferment? What moisture did you harvest it at? What’s the length of cut?

Nathan Casper, agronomist with InDepth Agronomy, discussed how to manage residue and the importance of feeding the plant.

“I love the idea of soil residue and soil cover (for) preventing erosion,” Casper said. “We can learn a lot from each other. We are just scratching the surface.”

Photo:

[Jake and Brody at Feed Pad](#)

Caption: Nutritionist Jake Sehr (left) and Brody Stapel, farm owner, share with field day attendees how growing and feeding higher-fiber digestibility crops improve animal performance during a gathering Aug. 31 at Stapel's farm in Cedar Grove.

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About Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers:

Sheboygan River Progressive Farmers is a nonprofit farmer-led conservation group in the Sheboygan River watershed in Sheboygan and Fond du Lac Counties in Wisconsin whose members explore farming strategies that lead to improved soil health, greater farming efficiency, sustained profitability and reduced environmental impact. Members share information gained through field trials with fellow farmers and strive to foster an understanding of the role of agriculture in the community. More information: <https://srpfarmers.com>

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