

A Hilltop View of the Land's Potential

Mark Erickson's Relationship with Landowners is Rooted in Healthy Soil

By Brian DeVore

When considering significant changes to the way one farms, there's nothing like a couple acres of convincer, a template for the potential offered up by tapping into the land's ability to build soil health in an economically viable manner utilizing livestock and perennial plants. Mark Erickson points out just such a personal proving ground on a fall day while guiding an old Buick coupe across a pasture in west-central Minnesota's Stevens County. Beyond a thin line of trees and next to a neighbor's cornfield is a two-acre patch of grass. He explains that fertility-wise, it's probably the best corn ground on the 450 acres of land he farms, but for years he grappled mightily to get it to reach its cropping potential. It was hard to get equipment to that spot and the soil is heavy, making it often too wet to crop. Once it dried up, it was full of ruts. Weeds like cockleburbs were a major headache.

"And when I planted that into grass, it went from the worst spot on the farm, the biggest headache, to the best," recalls Erickson.

By grazing beef cattle on that two-acre patch, he calculates it went from a \$300 suck on the farm's finances, to a \$500 benefit.

"When I first converted it, I'd come and sit down in the grass there and remind myself just how bad that used to be and how productive it is now. That corner convinced me about grass farming," says the farmer as he slowly heads for the road.

This and other experiences with grass farming won Erickson over, but it turns out he wasn't the only one that needed convincing that this land's future did not lie with annual row-cropping. He rents all 450 acres of what makes up Boss Ridge Ranch from four different landowners. These landowners, who are mostly in their 70s, pretty much

leave it to Erickson and his family as to how the land will be managed on a day-to-day basis. But seeding crop fields to grass, erecting fencing, laying down water lines and pretty much abandoning a farming system that dominates well over 90 percent of the surrounding landscape is a bit different than, say, deciding to buy a higher horsepower tractor. It truly is going against the grain and requires, at least philosophically, a long-term investment in a different way of managing the land.

For Erickson, it all started with the most basic resource present on those rented acres: soil. He talked to the landowners about how



On a day in late September, beef producer Mark Erickson moved cattle on land he rents in west-central Minnesota. He tries to communicate to the landowners the critical nature of building the long-term resilience of their land. "I think it's important to talk about what the future of the land is, and what the value of it is to children and grandchildren," he says. (LSP Photo)

when a certain farming practice improves the world beneath our feet, everything follows, from improved resiliency of the land to guaranteeing Erickson and his family can remain economically viable enough to steward those acres long into the future. That meant not only convincing the landowners that their real estate is better suited to a regenerative way of farming, but that the benefits of building soil health are worth waiting for, a tough sale when the immediate gratification of getting the highest cash rent for corn and soybean ground is dangling out there.

"I think it's important to talk about what the future of the land is, and what the value

of it is to children and grandchildren, and how you can make a system that will fit something other than just be all big farms," says Erickson. "Is there a value to that, is there a value to returning the soil to the organic matter standards it used to be?"

A Preference for Livestock

From the time he began farming on a part-time basis in the 1970s, Mark Erickson has always felt livestock out on the landscape played an important role in the viability of rural communities. For a time, he worked at a feed mill and he would collect sweepings from the plant to give to his small herd of pigs. And as a feed salesman, his customer base was made up of small- and medium-sized pork, beef, and dairy producers who integrated crops, livestock, and pasture into their diverse operations. Erickson worked for a short time in a confinement hog operation and that experience helped sour him on livestock production systems

that rely on lots of inputs—energy and water, as well as infrastructure such as manure and feed handling facilities—and take animals off the land. Plus, while growing up on a farm in southwestern Minnesota, he was exposed to pasture-based beef production by a neighbor.

But when he started renting land in Stevens County in 1993, Erickson was mostly a crop farmer, raising corn, soybeans, and wheat. His main farm, 240 acres, is owned by Delano and Linda Meyer, and it's where Mark and his wife Deb live. When Mark and Deb began leasing from the Meyers, they inherited three other landlords Delano and Linda had been renting from.

Crop farming on those acres was tough from the beginning. The Ericksons were virtually hailed out in 1994, and the heavy soils were difficult to manage even in "normal" years. This is a part of Minnesota where prairie pothole wetlands had once predominated—a public waterfowl area adjoins the land the Ericksons farm—and it's difficult to get good, consistent drainage.

"I planted this bottom, I dug it, I put fertilizer on it, and then I sprayed it, and then it rained," recalls Erickson, recalling one typical growing season. "And when I combined

Rent It Out Right, see page 15...

the corn, the combine is going down the row this way and all of a sudden the combine's going that way and I'm stuck."

Meanwhile, Erickson had kept his hand in livestock and had built up a small beef herd. He grazed pasture, cornstalks, and government wildlife land, and in 1998 started marketing grass-fed beef. As machinery wore out, weather conditions became increasingly unpredictable, and crop prices became too volatile to rely on for consistent profitability, he became convinced that row-cropping didn't fit this farmland or his goals for producing a long-term living on those acres.

Erickson was also concerned about the impact intensive row-cropping was having on the soil's health. Compaction and low organic matter levels were leading to excessive runoff and erosion, and low areas were consistently flooded out while higher spots tended to be droughty — all signs that the soil was in need of some biological life.

As a result of workshops and field days put on by the Land Stewardship Project and the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota, Erickson became fascinated by the role rotational grazing can play in building the kind of soil health that, for example, manages water better while producing quality forage.

By the late 2000s, the farmer was convinced that his future in agriculture did not lie with row-cropping, and he developed a plan to convert all of those rented acres to rotationally grazed pasture. In order to convert the land to pasture and grazing paddocks, the farmer needed to finance the improvements with the help of cost-share funds available through the USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which is administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Under an EQIP contract, the grass planting had to stay in place at least five years and the new perimeter fencing would need to remain untouched for 20 years.

Even though Erickson would be managing the contract, the landowners would have to agree to having grazing infrastructure on the acres they owned for a couple of decades. That meant he needed to bring them in on his plans, explain the impacts, and in general share his vision of what the farm could look like long into the future. Why not give them a firsthand look?

Sharing a Vision

On a summer morning in 2009, members of the four families that own the land the Ericksons are farming gathered at the farmstead for a field day, cookout, and a little socializing. As the landowners gathered, Mark explained how he was going to need to make some dramatic changes to stay in business.

Then they all climbed onto a hay rack for a ride up to a hilltop that afforded a nice view of the corn and soybean fields the farmer was managing on the rented land. Mark pointed out where the grazing paddocks could go, as well as the water lines and walking paths for the cattle. He asked the landowners to imagine what their land would look like covered in grass 365-days-a-year, a stark contrast to devoting those acres to annual row crops for just a few months each growing season. They then headed back to the farmstead for a lunch of beef that had been raised on the farm.

"I was trying to help them visualize



This photo of a field near where Mark Erickson farms is how crop acres typically look in his neighborhood during the fall harvest. "I think they enjoy being a part of something that's a little different, that has a different look to the land," says the farmer of the landowners he rents from. (LSP Photo)

what was going to happen to their land," recalls Erickson. "It felt like a powerful tool, because when you're sitting out there on that hill, then people can visualize it and it makes so much more sense. Being on the farm brought up questions you would never be able to get just by trying to tell them about it over the telephone or writing a letter."

Not surprisingly, one question that came up had to do with the EQIP contracts. Who was responsible for managing them and for how long? What if they decided to rent to another farmer, who then wanted to plow it up, tear out the fences, and raise row crops? Erickson had prepared for such questions by inviting two staffers from the local Natural Resources Conservation Service office. They showed maps of the proposed graz-

ing set-up, which would include water lines out to the paddocks, and explained that the Ericksons were responsible for managing the infrastructure.

Mark also explained that the water lines would be buried 20 inches deep, so if tillage returned to the land, they would be below the plow line. Also, the interior fencing would consist of one strand of portable line, so it could be easily removed (the farmer moves the interior fencing constantly to manage his grazing schedule anyway).

"So, it's not something that would be impossible to reverse," says Mark.

The sales pitch worked.

"That was really helpful," recalls Delano Meyer. "Mark has been really helpful in explaining things in ways that people could understand. He's good at laying out his vision."

For the Meyers, seeing their farmland in all grass was an attractive idea, both from an environmental and economic point of view.

They started farming in 1972 on some of Linda's family's land after Delano returned from serving in the military during the Vietnam War. Over the next several years, they grew their crop and livestock operation rapidly until they were running 1,000 acres and had two employees. Delano concedes they expanded without enough equity and in the late 1970s and early 1980s hit hard financial times. They downsized to 640 acres, and in 1994 decided to get out of farming so they could do missionary work overseas. That's when they rented out their 240-acre home place to the Ericksons, and connected them with the other landowners they had been renting from. When they are not doing missionary work, the Meyers live a few miles from the Ericksons in a rented house.

Farming systems that build soil health in the long-term resonate with Linda and Delano. When they were farming, they grew wheat as part of their rotation. This gave them a window during the growing season to plant a rye cover crop, which they grazed cattle on in the fall, helping build soil health while providing an inexpensive source of forage. They also grazed pasture as well as area wildlife lands.

"When we were farming, having cattle grazing was one of our favorite things," says Linda, adding that the one thing they did not miss about farming was running machinery to raise crops.

The hilltop visioning session worked on the other landowners as well, who do not have the extensive farming background the Meyers do. Another landowner, who is a

retired CEO of a steel company, got up after the meal and said he had to get back to the Twin Cities, where he was going to tell his brother “to go along with this.”

It helped that the farmer already had a good track record of being up front and honest with the landowners. For example, one 80-acre piece Erickson rents from a retired engineer sits next to land that in 2013 sold for over \$7,000 an acre. That 80-acre parcel lies flat and is relatively square. Although it’s full of potholes, it could be drained with tile lines, making for good crop ground.

“I thought the landlord should know that this is what’s happening with the neighboring land, how much it’s worth,” recalls Erickson. “I called him and said, ‘It would be a perfect time for you to come in with a bulldozer and take out that small grove of trees and tile these 80 acres.’”

The farmer explained that, on the other hand, if he was to continue as the renter, he would need to plant it to grass and put in fencing and water lines. The landowner didn’t hesitate.

“He said, ‘I want that 80 in grass. I love what you’re doing there.’” Erickson recalls.

The Land Responds

The year of the landowner field day was Mark’s last one raising row crops. Since then, he’s built up a cow-calf herd of Scottish Highlands crossed with Black Angus. He has as many as 320 animals grazing on 450 acres and finishes cattle on grass, direct marketing the beef as well as selling through the Thousand Hills Cattle Company.

As Erickson explains on a recent fall day while moving cattle from paddock-to-paddock, he is constantly tweaking his grazing system. He utilizes mob grazing, a system that moves the animals through the paddocks on a daily basis, leaving behind plenty of forage to feed the soil and build resilient pastures in the long-term.

Erickson has built his organic matter levels from around 3 percent to, in some cases, 6 percent, and that’s paid off in more productive paddocks and better water infiltration. On a day when neighboring farmers were idled from corn harvest by heavy rains, the grazer was able to drive his coupe out into his pastures to move cattle without getting stuck.

“The infiltration here is mind-boggling,” says Erickson. “We got four inches of rain in July and normally that would have drowned out whatever crop I had out there. After that rain, there was not a

drop of water in any bottom ground here.”

Indeed, NRCS estimates show that 1 percent of organic matter can hold as much as 25,000 gallons of water per acre in the top six inches of soil. And a recent study on farms in the United Kingdom showed a relationship between higher soil organic matter levels and better animal performance. Fields that were grazed more intensively had healthier soils and were less prone to water and nutrient losses, found the study.

Erickson has been able to increase the carrying capacity of his pastures and the cattle are healthy and productive. But he isn’t satisfied — some pastures have bare spots where the ground isn’t armored properly, and when he looked at one of his soil samples through a microscope during a 2018 LSP field trip, he didn’t detect any nematodes, which he took as a sign that the soil isn’t as biologically active as it could be. Erickson has been experimenting with composting and “fungi piles” to boost his soil health further, and attends workshops and field days to learn more techniques.

And he believes talking about soil health and all of its benefits, from healthier livestock to cleaner water, is important as well — especially with the people who own the land that soil sits on.

“I think they enjoy being a part of something that’s a little different, that has a different look to the land,” says Erickson.

Delano Meyer agrees. “Mark hit the nail right on the head,” he says. “That is exactly the case.”

A Long-Term Relationship

When that kind of vision resonates with a landowner, it means seeing things from the farmer’s perspective, including the economics of the situation. Erickson is very happy with how he has developed a grazing system that produces quality beef, but concedes that marketing has been a bit of a “nightmare” in recent years. Processing headaches, coupled with customers’ changing lifestyles and desire for low cost convenience have made it difficult to attain consistently profitable prices. One small advantage Erickson has is

Give it a Listen

On episode 222 of LSP’s *Ear to the Ground* podcast, Mark Erickson discusses how talking about soil health to landowners can help them see the benefits of creating long-term relationships: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/1167.

that since the land he’s farming isn’t in row crops, it’s not receiving top dollar on the rental market. His landowners are willing to maintain reasonable rental rates so that they can keep a good steward like Mark on their land in the long term.

“I don’t even bother to ask what the top cash rent is, because we are able to make a living and Mark has made a lot of improvements to the farm with sweat equity,” says Delano.

Sweat equity is hard to calculate in a cash rental rate, and so are, at least in the long-term, improvements to the soil’s resiliency.

“Maybe they were getting high cash rents, but I think the soil is worn out.” Delano says of landowners in the area who have been renting out their own crop ground. “I like that our soil is not getting soaked up by Roundup, it’s not washing away, it’s not blowing away.”

Mark is 65, and he and Deb have four adult children, some of whom are interested in farming. Erickson concedes that being a renter puts the long-term future of his family’s farming dreams in doubt. But for now, he feels purchasing land does not pencil out financially. The Meyers—Linda is 71 and Delano 74—have two children who are in their 40s and who have no interest in farming. They feel good about the long-term relationship they have with the Ericksons, and that such a relationship can survive past their own lifespan.

“I’ve seen the improvements with regenerative agriculture. I don’t think we’ve even begun to see the returns we can get from improving microbial life,” says Delano. “But to get there is a long-term endeavor.” □

Leases that Fit Your Stewardship Values

The Land Stewardship Project and the League of Women Voters have assembled a “toolkit” for people seeking to utilize leases that emphasize building soil health and other conservation practices. Tools include: tips on how to hold conversations with renters, lease templates, guides on setting rental rates for soil building practices, and background materials on soil health. For free copies of the **Conservation Leases Toolkit**, see www.landstewardshipproject.org/stewardshipfood/conservationleases. More information is also available by contacting Robin Moore at 320-269-2105 (rmoore@landstewardshipproject.org) or George Boody at 612-722-6377, (gboody@landstewardshipproject.org).

While on the Conservation Leases web page, check our LSP’s latest fact sheet: “**Why Do MN Farmers Do What They Do? A Farming Practices Primer for Landowners Who Don’t Farm.**”