

Experts: Pasturing Is Agronomic Art

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study, is still wide open for new findings.

As a practice, pasturing is closer to a form of art, and in the end may require more mental energy and attention than more widely practiced methods of livestock production.

On Tuesday, during an all-day seminar of pasturing held in a meeting room at the Farm Show building in Harrisburg, four professional agronomic experts working for Penn State University or the USDA provided a basic framework for understanding the basics of pasturing.

In addition, two dairymen who practice pasturing as a controlled form of supplemental feeding of cattle, presented their views and opinions on the practice and how it fits into their individual operations. They were Forrest Stricker, of Berks County, who has milks about 60 Holsteins and has been pasturing for a year to provide fresh forages, and Tom Williams of Dauphin County, who has been pasturing his Jersey herd for eight years.

If anything was concluded at the end of the seminar, it was that pasturing has the potential to reduce overhead costs in a number of areas of animal husbandry, and raise net gain, but the extent to which the practice can be used is farm and farmer specific.

The seminar was sponsored jointly by the Penn State University Extension, the USDA Soil Conservation Service, and the Pennsylvania Forage and Grassland Council.

Speakers included Paul Craig, an agronomist who serves as Dauphin County Extension agent; Dr. Marvin Hall, an assistant professor and forage agronomist at Penn State University; Dr. Jerry Jung, a senior researcher with the USDA Pasture Research Laboratory at State College; and Duane Pysher, a grassland management specialist with the USDA Soil and Conservation Service, in Harrisburg.

Craig began the seminar with a talk stating that his specialty is the agronomics of soils and crop production and how he and Pysher, after attending one of several other grazing seminars offered to farmers over the course of the past several years, decided to focus on the basics of forage production in pastures, such as considering soil fertility and weed control.

Of the estimated 100 people who attended the seminar, about a dozen indicated they already practice pasturing as a part of their operation. Attendees came from all over the state and Maryland.

And while the seminar wasn't intended to focus on any specific livestock production, the most common use and interest of pasturing locally has been in the dairy industry.

Craig said that in checking with the Pennsylvania Agricultural Statistics Service, there are about 1.5 million acres in pasture in Pennsylvania. About 800,000 acres of that is classified as suitable for cropland. Another 400,000 acres are suitable for nothing but pasture, and the remainder is classified as woodland.

About half of the acres considered pasture are not being maximized for production, he said.

Craig said that poor soil fertility, weed problems and erosion are some of the major concerns with pastures, but it's a Catch-22, he said. Poor soil fertility leads to weed problems, which leads to poor ground cover, which leads to erosion, which leads to poor soil fertility, etc.

The way to break the cycle is to understand the components of the pasture, and possible components of a pasture, before entering into a serious program of using pasture forages as a dependable source of nutrition for livestock.

"If there is one thing you could do, it is to put a fence down the middle (of a pasture) and flip-flop," he said.

"I see farmers who know how to

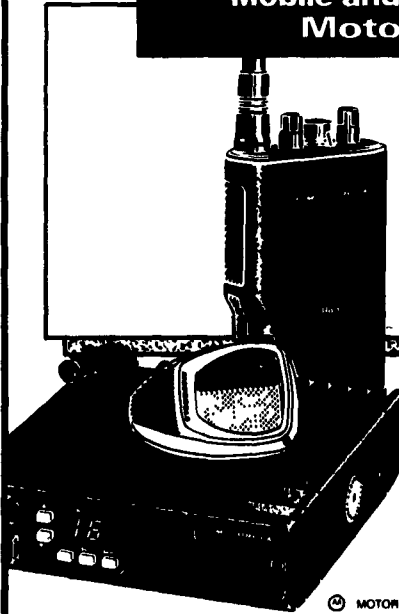
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From the left, speakers at a pasturing seminar are Dr. Marvin Hall, PSU assistant professor and forage agronomist; Dr. Jerry Jung, senior researcher with the USDA Pasture Research Lab at State College; Duane Pysher, grassland management specialist with the USDA Soil Conservation Service; and Paul Craig, Dauphin County Extension agent.

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