

Birdsfoot Believer

Trefoil & Grasses Match This Minnesota Haymaker's Soil, Management, & Markets

by Paul Peterson, University of Minnesota

His farm, like most in east-central Minnesota, was carved out of the forest in the late 1940s. Much of the acreage has never been plowed due to too many rocks. But Dick LeCocq, owner and operator of Lazy L Ranch near Mora, MN, since 1983, has figured out how to use forages to make this tough ground profitable.

Dick owns 360 acres, of which 100 is tillable. He also rents an additional 400 acres of grass meadows. It's all in forage for hay or pasture. In addition to producing hay to sell, he used to run ~100 beef cows until about six years ago, when he opted to take a full-time job off the farm. He continues to make hay to sell, but now leases out his pasture acres.

Hay Seller. "I've always been a hay seller," says LeCocq. His buyers have been, and continue to include horse owners, dairies, beef operations, and MNDOT. Dick markets his hay via hay brokers, word of mouth, and the Internet; he has not needed to do much direct advertising.

Clients vary from year to year, but on average, ~60% of his clients are horse-owners and ~30% are dairy/beef operators. His horse clients like green, grassy hay with no mold, which he can consistently provide. His dairy buyers are often looking for low-potassium hay for their dry cows; this is another hay product he can consistently provide.

Trefoil "Seeding." Dick has experimented with a broad range of forage species including alfalfa, clovers, birdsfoot trefoil, timothy, orchardgrass, and low-alkaloid reed canarygrass. He has found that he can make alfalfa work, but only with high input costs and some stand losses in low spots. Experience has taught him that alfalfa does not pay on his pH ~5.5ish ground.

Dick has attempted both broadcast and no-till drill seedings into existing sods. While he has had some success, primarily with clovers, he has gotten his best stands with conventional spring seeding following glyphosate application and tillage. These successful seedings have been with an oat forage nurse crop with no additional seeding-year harvests.

His greatest success with seeded species has come with birdsfoot trefoil and low-alkaloid reed canarygrass, which flourish well on variable rocky ground with acidic soil. In recent years, two hay cuttings per year, livestock movement, and winter-hay unrolling have been his primary methods to establish birdsfoot trefoil more broadly across his farm.

Moisture Monitoring. On established stands, Dick cuts twice and never cuts after mid-September. This cutting schedule suits his soil and markets. His full-time employment off-farm, together with the high cost of synthetic fertilizers, has him approaching his hay-production inputs somewhat conservatively. "I've seen good responses to manure and fertilizer, but fertilization has not always been cost-effective to my operation in recent years, so some years I just take what is there without fertilizer," reports LeCocq.

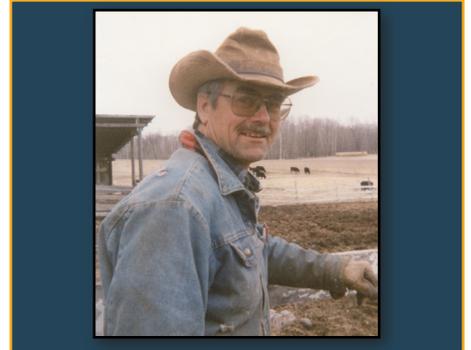
A haying technique he swears by is a moisture meter he has in his round-baler, which provides a moisture reading every two seconds. Dick can simply flip a switch to apply propionic acid where it may be needed to ensure good hay preservation. He finds this especially useful on his variable ground where low ground produces thicker hay that does not dry as quickly. It also fits well with his full-time work schedule, so he can bale safely in the late evening. In general, if his moisture meter reports >15% moisture, he will apply propionic acid. If moisture is >20%, he will quit; as the amount of propionic acid needed for safe hay preservation becomes cost-prohibitive for his markets.

LeCocq makes 4' x 6' round bales that average 1300 lbs, and updates his baler every 4-5 years. Hay is cut into wide swaths with a 12' sickle-mower/conditioner, and raked into narrower windrows prior to round-baling. Per his soil resource and hay markets, first harvest occurs late-June to early-July, when the forecast shows a rain-free 5-day window. Then Dick will hire help to have 2-3 cutters and 3 balers going to produce 300+ net-wrapped round bales per day. Dick never hays after mid-September, as he has seen detrimental effects on the next year's production with fall cutting on his ground.

Rest & Residual. While he acknowledges that more pasture subdivision would be better, Dick practices a 2-pasture rotation. Key to his success with limited subdivisions is his commitment to respect healthy pasture residual heights, and to rest pastures longer as growth slows in summer. In spring, Dick turns cattle in when pastures are 8-10" tall to top-graze; the residual is 'stockpiled' for summer pasture. His pastures are largely 'naturalized' species including bluegrass, timothy, and birdsfoot trefoil introduced via his whole-farm system management.

When Dick was running his own cattle with additional rented pasture acreage, he stockpiled some pasture beginning July 15 that he would not turn cattle back on until the following April in order for them to consume stockpiled residue together with new spring growth. This approach enabled him to graze from April 15 to November, or later. Generally though, he will run one cow per 2-3 acres of pasture to ensure pastures are not overgrazed.

"Pumped Up." Dick is a long-time supporter of forage council/association efforts. He is humble about the numerous awards he received as a leader in the East Central Forage Council and Minnesota Forage & Grassland Council endeavors. Dick indicates that



forage association activities have always gotten him “pumped up” about the importance of forages and their best management.

Dick wants MFA readers to remember that forages are the #1 crop in the world, yet the most underutilized. In his ‘day’ job, he is consistently reminded that the best livestock operations are those that are the best forage managers.

Dick also sees opportunity for better integration of livestock grazing on hunting ground. In East-central Minnesota, he sees a lot of acreage bought for hunting where livestock are excluded. However, his experience has indicated that good pasture management favors wildlife presence, so a win-win is possible.