

The Ritter Farm - For Generations to Come

by Russ Mathison, University of Minnesota

Paul and Pat Ritter have owned and operated a 340 ac farm nestled in the forest near Remer in north central Minnesota for 32 years. Their primary focus has been on beef cow-calf production. However, a number of alternative enterprises have frequently been a part of the Ritter's total farm system. About 170 ac are devoted to perennial forage production and 10 ac are devoted to raising oats, primarily for the straw. Alfalfa with reed canarygrass is one of the preferred mixtures for stored forage production. Paul thinks the two species have similar growth patterns, reaching suitable harvest maturity at about the same time. Forage DM yield with alfalfa and reed canarygrass is usually superior to any other species mixture grown on the farm, and forage quality is excellent for the beef cattle and recreational horses. Other perennial forages produced on the Ritter farm include red clover with either orchardgrass or timothy. Although these species are not as persistent or productive, they are grown on fields with a low pH.



Paul Ritter with his grandson, Braden, at his farm.

Ashes Are an Ideal Source of Lime and Plant Nutrients

Many soils in this region are acidic, and need to be limed in order to raise alfalfa. The Ritter farm, along with many others in the forested areas of northern Minnesota, utilize ash produced from burning wood mixed with coal as a lime and nutrient source. Several forest-product industries burn waste wood and coal to produce electricity or steam, and the resultant ashes are an excellent source of lime, potash, sulfur and boron. The Ritter farm receives their ashes from the Rapids Energy Center operated by MN Power in Grand Rapids. The facility produces about 10,000 tons of ash annually, most of which is utilized on area farms adding a substantial stimulus to the local and regional economy.

Beef Cattle are the Primary Farm Enterprise

Ritter's beef herd is primarily Angus cows, both red and black. Paul prefers the Angus breed because they make good mothers, are docile and easy to handle, and are "easy keepers." Due to their smaller frame size, "they will not eat you out of house and home in the winter." Herd size varies from 30-50 head based on several factors, including the sex of calves born, seasonal forage production, culling practices and beef prices. Breeding is accomplished with a bull, not artificial insemination, with a new bull being purchased every year. Paul relies upon his local network of beef producers to supply bulls, and is confident he can tell which bull sources will give him the desired results. The Ritter's is a spring calving herd, usually beginning in mid-March. Paul will begin this year delaying the calving season later into the spring to help avoid losing calves to inclement weather. Calves are sold in the fall, although smaller calves or those that do not appear as vigorous as the rest are retained and brought into condition with supplemental feed before marketing.

Diversifying Can Be Profitable, And Fun

Occasionally, the Ritters have tried alternative enterprises. The most recent was ostrich production. It is readily apparent that Paul developed a strong passion for these large birds. "Pretty Boy" is the only one currently on the farm, but there are soon to be more. Paul states that ostrich production provides the opportunity for several revenue streams. The eggs can be incubated and hatched to either increase flock size or sell as flock or breeding stock. The eggs are also popular to certain types of artists, who blow out the egg's contents and use the shells as a 3-dimensional canvas to produce beautiful art pieces. Female ostriches lay about 30 eggs/year, with most egg production beginning slowly in spring, peaking in summer and tapering off in the fall. One male ostrich can service two females. Ostriches can also be raised to produce meat. It takes about 15 months to raise an ostrich to slaughter, and the yield of meat is about 140 lbs/animal. Ostrich meat is red, similar in texture to beef, but with a very unique flavor. The meat contains little fat, so is very low in cholesterol, making it popular with certain segments of the population, such as senior citizens. And here is a little known fact: ostriches get along great with beef cows! On the Ritter farm, calves often slip into the ostrich pen and eat their rabbit pellets, which Paul uses as the ostriches primary food source.



Paul with "Pretty Boy."

Information of Forages is Valuable

Paul is an avid, card-carrying member of the Midwest Forage Association. He states MFA's network for providing information from the research sector, extension, government and industry is an extremely valuable tool to him as a producer. In addition, Paul feels the

lobbying efforts conducted by MFA on behalf of the forage industry are having, and will continue to have, a very positive influence on educational and government policy.

This is a True Story!

One-on-one talks with producers can be entertaining as well as educational. The following is a fun and exciting story from Paul and Pat Ritter. They once raised two bull calves to about 1,400 lbs, then Paul took them to the sales barn. One of the bulls got excited and wanted “out” of the sales ring. The only visible daylight was coming through a window behind the crowd, so the bull managed to climb out of the auction ring, ran through the crowd which was in theatre-style bench seating, toward the windows. Along the way, the bull destroyed the phone banks being used by feedlot buyers. Finding no escape, the bull turned and headed back through the scattering crowd. One individual swatted at the bull with his seat cushion attempting to change its path, but instead the bull began chasing the man at very close range. The quick thinking individual led the bull, rodeo clown style, back to the chute where it was to leave the auction ring in the first place. So with no-one getting injured, everyone had a one-of-a-kind story to tell. The story preceded Paul everywhere he went that day, and Paul Ritter is well remembered by all of the owners, auctioneers and livestock handlers still.