

Simple Philosophy Serves Ruh Farms Well

Jon Dockter, Midwest Forage Association

Steve Ruh's farming philosophy is simple — treat the land with respect. Make decisions based on what is best for the land so that it is protected and provides for this generation and generations to come. This philosophy may surprise those urbanites who believe that farmers care less about the environment than they do about turning a profit and are only concerned with “the bottom line.” But Steve, like most farmers, understands that his care of the land is inextricably linked to how well his land will ultimately take care of him.



He farms near Sugar Grove, IL. Steve's parents, Herb and Alvena Ruh, decided to slow down a bit in the mid-90s by selling off the dairy herd but maintaining all the land for grain and forage production. Steve was 25 at the time and it offered him an opportunity to slowly take over the family farm. At that time his family owned 360 acres. Since then, Ruh Farms has purchased an additional 600 acres and rents another 2,000.

While the family has retired from the dairy business, the crop rotation has stayed pretty much the same with corn (1,500 acres), soybeans (1,000 acres), wheat (350 acres), and alfalfa (150 acres).

Soil types vary from Elburn (surface layer of black silt loam with subsurface slightly acidic to mildly alkaline) and Drummer (a thick, black, silty clay loam surface layer with a very dark gray silty clay loam subsurface) where the Ruhs try to focus on row crops, to some clay soils where they rotate wheat and alfalfa seedings.

Steve uses a crop consultant/agronomist on all of his acres. As his acreage grew, Steve could not keep up with proper scouting, nor was it within his area of expertise (there was always mowing, cutting, or baling to do, so he focused his time on production activities). Therefore, he relies heavily on the advice and counsel of his agronomist.

When it comes time to harvest alfalfa, Steve tends to bale the majority of the hay and straw in 3x3x8' bales. Steve has found this to work best for transportation and labor issues. He purchased a Case IH baler in 1998 and still relies on it heavily to this day, adding, “It has been rebuilt several times, but it has been the best single machine purchase I have ever made.”

Steve sells his high-quality hay to dairies and horse enthusiasts in the area. The majority of his customers are dairy farms, although he maintains a few local horse accounts that have made the transition over to using large squares. As Steve puts it, “I still enjoy the interaction with the dairymen, as that is how I grew up, so it has always been easy to relate to them. My dad and I often joke that we take making hay more seriously now than we did when we were making it for our own herd.” Steve has never had to advertise his hay, as word-of-mouth sales from satisfied customers have long been his best and most effective sales tool.



Ruh Farms raises alfalfa two ways, seeding with oats in the spring and direct seeding following wheat. Both seem to work well in the northern area of Illinois where Steve lives, depending upon on how demand shapes up. Steve tries to get 4 cuttings a year, with the last taken the second or third week of September. He tries to shoot for 35-day intervals between cuttings, but that is completely up to the cooperation of Mother Nature. Stands generally last 4-5 years. Steve applies 300 lbs potash after first cutting with yields tending to average between 5-6 tons/year. The price Steve charges for his hay is generally determined by the RFV, which he believes is a very fair measure of quality for both buyer and seller. His straw is generally sold by the ton with most of it used in feed rations.

Steve's biggest management decision deals with his allocation of acres, i.e., what crop will give him the highest net return per acre, corn vs hay. He says, "All of our ground would be easy to put to row crops, and when the price of corn is in that \$5-\$6 range, it is hard to grow hay. But my dad always tells me to stay the course and be diversified. You will catch the highs and the lows in all the commodities. Plus my golf game hasn't improved much over the years so I might as well bale hay all summer."

As for his membership in the Midwest Forage Association, Steve says, "I still enjoy reading an actual magazine as do most farmers. So it's nice to get caught up on the latest and greatest in the industry by reading MFA's *Forage Focus*. I haven't checked my records, but I would assume I have been a member of MFA for 10 years or so." Steve understands the value that membership in commodity organizations brings to his operation. He is also past president of the Illinois Corn Growers Association and former chair of the National Corn Growers Association's Ethanol Committee.

From Steve's perspective, the best thing about being a farmer is the enjoyment that comes from being independent and being his own boss.

To hear Steve tell it, "The ability to provide for and raise a family in the farming lifestyle has been a huge blessing. I take pride in knowing that we are making a significant positive contribution in the local, national, and international communities."