Millers Balance Forage Needs with Conservation Goals

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Winona County is known for its many dairy farms, and farmers in the area produce a lot of milk. But, the steep sloping topography along with the amount of rain received make for a challenging environment. Farmers in the area make it work. Robb Miller and the rest of the team at Clear Crest Farms are no exception. The dairy was originally established by Robb's grandparents in 1936. After studying agronomy and ag business management, Robb came back to the farm in 1994. Currently, he farms with his brother Luke. Their parents are still involved in the operation as well.

Robb Miller and his daughter Ella.

The Millers produce forage for their 600 cow dairy herd on 1,700 acres, a combination of owned and rented land. They grow alfalfa, soybeans, triticale, and corn for grain and silage. For erosion concerns, corn silage is grown on their more level fields. They also plant no-till beans and have been using a vertical tillage system which only goes to a depth of 2". The system leaves evenly sized, well-chopped residue on the soil surface. Robb finds it to be a happy medium between no-till and more aggressive tillage systems. The whole farm is grid sampled as well. They've been using variable-rate applications of nutrients which especially helps them track phosphorous levels.

The Millers typically seed alfalfa with an oat nurse crop. Including the seeding year, their stands rotate out in four years. They've been on a 30-day harvest schedule but are currently in the process of transitioning to reduced-lignin alfalfa. They hope to move toward a 35-day schedule and reduce the number of cuttings per year from four to three. One of the challenges the Millers have faced is good stand establishment of alfalfa. Seeding in the spring when conditions are wet has led to some poor initial stands. They're working on being patient and focusing on soil conditions rather than the calendar.

An area where they are excelling is in their use of triticale as a cover crop for erosion management and in their dairy ration. The Millers cover nearly all of their 300 acres of corn silage with triticale annually. Not only has it been an effective tool in reducing erosion, but the triticale has been a great feed as well.

The Millers (and their nutritionist) like triticale for its highly digestible fiber. It's fed to their milk cows and heifers. Chopped in the spring at boot stage, the triticale has yielded 8-9 tons/ac. They have seen RFV values >100 and RFQ of nearly 170.

Some have expressed concerns about triticale and its winterhardiness, but Robb hasn't had any issues. Keep in mind, Winona County is in far southeastern Minnesota, what some refer to as the "banana belt" because of warm temps and wet growing seasons. Robb would like to use more cover crops in the future. The challenge is the short window to plant after harvest. He's considering shorter maturity corn grain varieties to expand cover crop seeding time and increase the number of acres planted.

As a dairy operator, Robb values his MFA membership for the educational benefit it provides. "Good forage production is critical to the success of our operation. We began using triticale because we read about it in MFA publications." Robb sums it up well when he says, "We always need to learn."