

An interview with Ron Mandel about converting cropland into pasture

Why would anyone convert cropland into pasture?

If they have poor cropland (shallow soils), a mix of topography (upland and bottom ground), would like to use more of their land (fenceline areas), have waterways that are well established, have higher soil health goals they'd like to meet, and have animals they are willing to manage.

What are your goals for the farm?

I wanted to get away from traditional row crop farming due to the frustration of a years' worth of effort and not being rewarded financially. I've been using a low input system in row crops and realized that pasturing would be a better match for me. My daughter would like to take over the farm eventually and we needed a better model with more profitability per acre. By switching to grazing, I can keep inputs low and increase profits per acre. It's easier for us to manage grazing the farm than figuring out everything with managing to make money on row crops.



A before picture of the existing growth in the fenceline, very typical of farm boundary fences (left).



The mini excavator with a forestry mulcher clears out scrub brush and small trees in fencelines (right).

The forestry mower can chew up several year-old trees (3-4" diameter) (below left picture).



A section of completed fence along a town road (right). Trees that were in line with the fence, were used to save on fenceposts, creates shade and provide windbreaks during the winter.



What options were you considering for assistance in converting to grazing? What were the pros and cons of each?

EQIP (Federal cost sharing)-

Pro- very good money towards fencing, establishment of forage, and payment for rotationally grazing

Con- higher standards for fencing, timing is hard- long wait, might not get funded

No Cost share

Pro- can do anytime, no restrictions or rules to follow, will be able to optimize sale prices on products more effectively- can shop for lowest price materials, low-cost commitment

Con- bear full expense

FSR incentive

Pro- low-cost input, can use sales to optimize purchases, great public investment, able to do project now

Con- money not as much as federal cost sharing

What was the hardest part the project? Deciding what kind of fence we needed/ wanted and how/ where to build it. Committing to the decision, jump into it, and get it started.

How about the easiest part? Once I realized how much we could get done in a day, the project didn't seem so impossible to complete the project. Having great neighbors and friends pitch in makes it go faster.

What was the most satisfying part? Letting the cattle out into the fenced area and knowing that they were still "in"!

Any words of wisdom? I have to change my mindset. Going from a crop farmer to a grazer is a completely different mindset, weeds that were a problem in my crops- are not a problem anymore. They are forage!

How much did it cost to fence in all 112 acres?

- Materials: 9,028 lineal feet of 4 strand electric high tensile perimeter fence= \$5,400
- Labor: 120 hours of fence building valued at \$20/ hr= \$2,400
- Brush clearing/ Fenceline prep: 30 hours at \$50/hr= \$1,500

How does grazing make you money? I am custom grazing beef heifers for \$2/head/ day. I hope to be able to manage 40 head on the farm for the entire year. That comes to \$29,200 before my costs. I have 55 acres to seed to a perennial crop mix, costing \$55/ac (\$3,025 total). My other acreage is established hay ground and won't need to be planted. That leaves me \$26,175 for any minerals they need and pays me for my time moving fence. This works out to \$234/ acre. This is a considerable difference in profit from any row crops I've grown.