



The State of Grass Farming

photos by Author

Grazing legumes during breeding season: Should you do it or shouldn't you?

—Ulf Kintzel

"We know accurately only when we know little, with knowledge doubt increases." (Johann Wolfgang Goethe)

I thought I'd try writing an opinion piece this time. Before I start I would like to provide a bit of history about myself. I have been grazing sheep for more than 26 years now; first in Germany and now for 15 years in the United States. While I years ago fed some grain briefly to adult sheep as supplemental feed during the winter, I have always finished lambs on grass and never was stuck in the trap of high-input farming and grain feeding. In other words, I never had to change direction. While I always have and still do appreciate various publications for grass farmers and graziers, it has not ceased to amaze me what is being propagated nowadays. Many of those who offer advice have been at it for less than a decade but have become self-announced gurus who write books and have a considerable following, apparently claiming the ultimate truth. Yet, I find some of what is being said these days at least intellectually dishonest. Speaking from experience, I'd like to address some of what I find has been inaccurately propagated.

"Rent; don't own land." It has been pointed out that there is lots of idle land out there that can be rented cheaply. That is indeed true in many areas, and whenever I can rent cheaply, I usually do so, and in fact, I do currently have a ten-year lease on a parcel of land belonging to a neighbor. I also rent harvested hayfields and at times fields with winter wheat that I pasture in the fall for about six to eight weeks.

However, before I came to upstate New York and bought our farm I rented most of my pasture from the State of New Jersey as well as private parties. On the state land I had a five-year lease, with the option to extend the lease for an additional five years. I thought I had it made when I held the lease in my hand. I figured out soon that the state had no intentions of honoring much of what was written. They continued using my only water source to the point of running it dry for other non-agricultural purposes, permitted horseback riding in my pasture, organized non-agricultural events that inhibited my farming, rented the land out for hunting, dumped wood shavings in my pasture—the list continues. While I could stop

them successfully in each instance, they wore me down by taking up my time. I didn't have the desire or the time to fight; they had all day. While a private contract on private land appears to be a better deal, what do you do when ownership changes and the new owner insists on riding four-wheelers in your fields? What do you do if the neighbor keeps trespassing, knowing you can't do anything about it and the owner doesn't wish to get involved? What do you do if the owner is having a bad day and something you do that appears perfectly reasonable to you bothers the landowner and he threatens with consequences? I know that a contract will stand in court, but are you willing to fight? I am not. I need my peace of mind and I need the sense of security. Rented land doesn't supply either, especially if this is the majority of your land. I currently own most of the land I farm. I do rent an adjacent parcel worth about three to four weeks of grazing annually and I rent harvested fields from a neighbor where I spend about six to eight weeks in the fall. Clearly, I am not per se against renting. While I appreciate the land, I don't depend on it. Since my farm is still not fully stocked, it would only put a dent in my business if I were to lose the rented parcels, not jeopardize the existence it. In addition, I just love the idea of making improvements on my own land, knowing that I will reap the benefits without the risk of losing the land. It is such a comforting thought that in the four years I have farmed in New York State I have become a lot calmer and less agitated, so says my wife. In hindsight I must say that renting the majority of the land I farmed caused me literally many sleepless nights.

"Sheep and cows graze about seventy percent different species and have only thirty percent overlap." I may have the percentages wrong, but it matters not in regards to the point I am trying to make. It is implied that there is a certain percentage that a cow eats and a sheep doesn't and vice versa. A statement like this has led people to believe that they can add sheep to a cattle enterprise without sacrificing pasture. If you do that, you will soon find out that sheep may indeed eat some plants that cows don't like, but they will also eat almost anything that cows eat: ryegrass, orchard grass, fescue, any legume, cereal rye, oats—you name it, sheep will eat it. I find

the statement that cows and sheep eat mostly different plants not only inaccurate, but completely false. Sheep and cows very much compete for the same pasture. The ones propagating the loudest in various publications that you ought to have both together without sacrificing pasture don't seem to be at it long enough to even have an opinion. The ones I know who have been doing this for a while very much agree that cows and sheep compete for the same pasture.

“You need to see yourself as a grass farmer first.” I cannot speak for other species, but I do know that sheep require a very special knowledge. Their behavior differs a lot from cattle and their diseases are often species-specific. For instance, you better be prepared to be able to eradicate hoof rot. This disease is very different in sheep than it is in cattle. It is perhaps the most significant economical factor in my sheep farming operations. You will need to be able to identify other diseases and won't be able to rely on a veterinarian. Unless you live in Texas, you will not easily find a knowledgeable vet in the many dairy regions of this country, and guessing won't be worth the money he or she charges you for a farm visit. You will need to be your own vet. You will need to be able to identify diseases like overeating disease and enzootic abortion or it may put you out of business. You will also need to learn how sheep think if you want to rotate pasture and keep them fenced in. In short, grow all the grass you want; you won't be successful with sheep if you don't know them. Being a grass farmer won't cut it.

Government bashing. I admit that I too am not a keen friend of government and that government often deserves the criticism it gets. However, I am not into publicly bashing government. Much time has been spent and much ink has been used to do exactly that. While I have much to say about government in private conversations, publicly I prefer the quiet tone and prefer to lead by example. Healthy and well-fed animals in lush green pasture are a more convincing argument for your neighbor than loud bashing of corn subsidies. Aside from that, consider me biased. I grew up in communism and make the claim I do know truly bad government. What we have, regardless of whether it is Republican or Democrat, still is good government for the people, no matter how imperfect. Consider yourself lucky; you are living in one of the freest and most prosperous countries of the world.

“You are not getting along with your conventional neighboring farmers because you are a frontier and you are scaring the establishment.” My neighboring farmers are first and foremost my neighbors. Those that are my age or younger will probably be neighbors for another 20 years or more. Do I really want to argue about the Round-up ready soybeans he is growing and the grain he is feeding? No, I don't feel that need. I feel the need to get along with my immediate neighbors. I'd like to talk when asked and I like to share my knowledge...and

I certainly have strong opinions. That does not mean I need to bash what the neighbor does. Perhaps the fact that a grass farmer doesn't get along with his neighbors depends more on his or her attitude rather than on the fact that he is a “frontier.” I have never encountered my neighbors opposing my grass-farming views.

“Kick the hay habit; graze all winter.” It is true that too many people still feed too much hay and thus cut deeply into their profit margin. It is also true that a stand of third cutting most likely doesn't need to be hayed and can be grazed instead. Stockpiling pasture and grazing harvested fields can greatly extend the grazing season. I have grazed many winters in New Jersey without feeding any hay. That was when I was single and had nothing else to do. Yet, even then I had to worry in every snowstorm if I would make it to the sheep the next day since I didn't have a tractor. I also didn't know if they could still dig through the snow, and at times I indeed had to pull hay to them with a toboggan. That sounds funny in hindsight but not while you are doing it, trust me. Today I am a few years older and have a family and have a life aside from farming. I have lost the fear of snowstorms since I now have a four-wheel-drive tractor and feed round bales. I still try to reduce hay feeding time and I currently have about 90 or less hay feeding days compared to the usual 150 or more hay feeding days in my area. I feed most of my hay out in the field, and since all my hay is purchased I also view the hay as fertilizer. Yet, I am not trying to do away with hay feeding. I would rather have my sheep eat hay on a



Grazing sheep requires a very special knowledge about sheep to make a profit, not just knowledge about grass farming alone.

windy, 10-degree day than exposing them or myself to the elements. I also would like to go on a little winter trip now and then or ice fishing, and since I have no employees that I can chase out into the cold while writing about

winter grazing in the warmth of my house, I appreciate the convenience of hay feeding on those days.

“Don't own a tractor or any machinery.” It is true that many farms are over-mechanized. Farms like that must be tremendously in debt and that scares me. I have a little 40-some horsepower tractor and hope that this one will last until I retire. I have no plans of upgrading or buying a new tractor. Yet, my tractor has made life so much easier. I use it to feed round bales. I also use it to plow snow and to do one of my favorite summer

activities that allow me to pretend I am working: bush-hogging. While I spend many hours each year bush-hogging, it only costs me a few hundred dollars each year in diesel to do so. I tend to bush-hog immediately or almost immediately after grazing a pasture cell. The benefits have been countless. The grass remains palatable but the weeds have been reduced tenfold, especially the thistles. I have tried farming without bush-hogging and found it a mess. Before I owned a tractor I hired people to bush-hog for me and that never happened on time. In summary, while I agree that too many farms are over-mechanized, a tractor and some machinery can buy you peace of mind and make your farm more efficient and productive.

“Don’t try to eliminate weeds; teach your animals how to eat them.” Some of the weeds I found present at my farm were first ignored and later appreciated by my sheep, most noticeably milkweed. Other weeds, especially various kinds of thistles, are not eaten. I have no doubt that it is possible to teach animals to eat certain weeds. But what is the price you pay for teaching them? What is the benefit? I raise lambs on pasture to 80 to 90 lbs. in 3 and 1/2 to 5 months. In order to get these gains, the lambs are pushed to eat as much as possible every day. There is no day when they go hungry. Teaching how to eat weeds requires just that: going hungry. Purposely teaching how to eat weeds would come with a big price tag for me. My bush-hog does a great job keeping the remaining weeds in check that the sheep don’t like and repeated bush-hogging weakens most weedy stands, too.

“Don’t let sheep graze legumes during breeding season.” Many articles have been written about what to feed and graze and what not to graze when you have your ewes bred. In these articles published in the leading sheep farming magazines by professors, veterinarians, and other employees of universities and extension services throughout the country you will be advised, even warned, to not graze legumes, especially red clover, but also white clover, birds-foot trefoil, and alfalfa, when breeding sheep. Some articles say legumes may have an adverse effect on cattle’s fertility as well. We can probably agree on the fact that legumes are essential in a perennial pasture in order to farm in a sustainable manner, simply because these legumes fixate nitrogen in such a successful manner that nitrogen fertilizer may become obsolete. So, how do you avoid legumes during breeding season, and should you? Bennetts et al. did a study in 1946 on sheep grazing subterranean clover in Australia and noticed an adverse effect on ewe fertility by the estrogen-like substance found in that clover. The same substance can be found in many other clovers, as well as other feed stuff like soy meal. There have been some subsequent studies, mainly in Australia. I am unaware of a more recent, credible study conducted in North America. A study conducted on red clover pasture in my native East Germany, however, found no adverse effect of red clover. Unfortunately, I am unable to cite this study but recall it from my apprenticeship school. I suspect that the professors and extension services keep quoting the same study conducted many years ago. Or do they quote each other? I don’t know because they don’t say very often where

their knowledge comes from. I do know it is not firsthand and certainly not from experience. So, how great is the danger so often cited? I have been grazing pasture with 30 to 50 percent legumes, including red clover as well as white clover, alfalfa, and birds-foot trefoil, for decades. I have achieved lambing rates between 180 and 220 percent with Texel, Dorper, and crossbred sheep. My conception rate is usually between 98 and 99 percent, meaning among 200 ewes I may have one or two ewes each year that do not conceive for reasons unknown to me. Naturally, I doubt that a 1946 study conducted on Australian subterranean clover is all that relevant to me. The question remains: When legumes are so vital for a sustainable grazing operation, how responsible is it to warn time and time again against grazing legumes during sheep breeding season without being able to cite a more recent, credible, and relevant study?

“Your grass-fed food will cure all diseases.” It is true that the benefit of grass-fed meats, organically grown vegetables, and whole grains are countless and undisputable. I am living it. I certainly got rid of many problems and shed many pounds since I eat healthier. However, I don’t think healthy food alone is the answer. You can still get cancer which no grass-fed meat and dairy products will cure. We can certainly prevent many diseases with eating healthy, but eating healthy is not the answer to every disease.

So, what is my point, other than being able to vent about what has been bothering me for some time now? My point is that the frontiers of grass farming, especially many of its most noticeable advocates, have gone overboard with their opinions and have alienated some that didn’t need to be alienated. Some of their advice is intellectually dishonest. It won’t work and the future will prove just that. Even though they have not been doing it long enough to prove to themselves and to others that the answers hold water, they propagate it as if it were the ultimate truth and wisdom.

In addition, not everything old-time farmers do is wrong and not everything grass farmers do is right. It is true that farming that depends on fossil fuels and subsidies is not sustainable and that there is a cost that the public pays in polluted water, air, and soils. How we go about a shift in priorities is another matter. I prefer to convince people by having the best sheep in town that thrive on grass better than the best grain-fed sheep around me. If that doesn’t convince my neighbor, my arguments, no matter how loudly I voice them, won’t do it either. 

Ulf Kintzel is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. In 2006 he moved from New Jersey to Rushville in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm. He breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep without any grain feeding. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone at 585-554-3313.