

Soil Health Producer Highlights Series

My Farm, My Soil, My Story

Don Ruzicka—Ruzicka Sunrise Farm, Killam, AB

- * What does “Soil Health” mean to you and why is it important?

Healthy soils, healthy pastures, healthy animals, healthy food, healthy people. Soil health also contributes to the “spirit of the land” by increasing biodiversity across a broad spectrum. This contributes to the “spirit” of the farmers.

- * What management practices have you used to improve soil health on your operation?

Rotational grazing with water pumped to every paddock keeps nutrients from the cattle evenly distributed. Mob grazing increases ground cover and contributes to bare patches of soil being covered when seeds germinate. Pasture poultry are grazed on tame pastures in shelters that are moved every day; feed is consumed and fertilizer is left behind, which makes for great growth of forages. Our winter bale grazing is followed by grazing hogs which speeds up composting of the residue due to the hogs rooting through these areas in spring and summer.

- * What changes have you seen?

Increased litter has reduced evaporation and run-off which is huge in drought years. During mild winters the stockpiled forage allows cattle to graze into February. We have a good population of alfalfa in our 18 year old tame pastures. Late fall grazing leaves a tall alfalfa stem that acts as a snow trap. In a cool spring with a slow melt, this water heads south getting the pastures off to a great start.

- * What are the biggest challenges for soil health in your area?

Increasingly inconsistent weather patterns; when it does rain, it seems to come in large amounts in a short period of time. Litter from previous years slows run-off.

- * How do you advocate for soil health?

Since multi species grazing is still quite radical, our farm is always open to visitors to come and see how we manage our soil and the benefits that are derived from this model. Open farm days, field days, pasture tours, participation in a U of A carbon sequestration project, DU Natural Advantage pilot project, eco-buffer native pollinator demonstration plantings and working with U of A students on Community Service Learning projects that have to do with sharing our methods of being soil advocates.

- * Do you have any future plans for improving the Soil Health on your operation?

This spring, as a pilot project, we worked up four acres where we have baled grazed for many years and planted a cover crop of ten different annual plant species. Even with the drought, once the rains started it turned out to be a jungle which will add carbon and increased water retention capacity to the soil. We also mob grazed it to the liking of the cattle who added their nutrients to the mix.

- * How has improving your soil health improved other aspects of your operation?

One of our major goals is to maintain and promote biodiversity. The healthier pastures and litter have attracted more nesting birds which in turn eat grasshoppers and their larvae, which show up in a drought. Overall, we feel that the more species we have in the ecosystem, the more resilient our farm will be to droughts and other environmental challenges.

Don and Marie are third generation farmers on Ruzicka Sunrise Farm, North West of Killam. They just celebrated 100 years of their family farming the same land. Their 800 acre farm is all tame and native pasture except for a few acres of cover crop. They do multi species grazing of poultry, hogs, custom grazing and their own small cattle herd. Don has been an active member of the Iron Creek Watershed Improvement Society since it formed in 2001.



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