

Soil Health Producer Highlights Series

My Farm, My Soil, My Story

Doug & Deb Skeels—Rocky Mountain House, AB

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

If the soil is not healthy we don't produce much grass. Quality grass translates into pounds of beef. Land is expensive here. We need to grow as much grass as we can on a small land base.

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

We started with rotational grazing quite a few years ago. We noticed a considerable improvement in grass production, so we continued with it.

We have also tried swath grazing for several years. We tried different crops with different times of grazing. We have used oats, barley, triticale and mixtures with peas for the swath grazing over the years. Triticale far out produced the other crops each year. We have issues with wildlife fouling and trampling the swathes. We still think it is highly beneficial for the land and an economical way of feeding cattle.

A few years ago Ag Canada wanted to do a trial on bale grazing. We volunteered our farm. In the 4 years this study has been conducted, we noticed a substantial increase in grass production in the bale grazed areas. Those areas remain green and productive much later in the fall than the other pasture. It also works well for time management and no equipment usage during the winter to feed the cows. Bales are all set out in the grazing area one day in the fall. Feeding the cattle simply requires moving a temporary electric fence of 1/16 inch aircraft cable.

* What changes have you seen?

More grass, more forage species, better color to the grass, and the quality lasts later into the fall. Manure disappears quickly. This year there was a drought in our area. That's something we have not seen for several years, being so close to the mountains. The thatch from the bale grazing conserved what little water there was. You could see a noticeable difference in the same field where the bale grazing was done and not done.

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

There is general low soil fertility in the grey wooded soil in our area. It seems to require importation of nutrients by some means. The soil type and depth is highly variable even in a small area. Everyone's soil is different and you need to figure out what best works for your soil type and conditions.

* How do you advocate for soil health?

Doug is a past director of GWFA and Deb is a current director of GWFA. Deb is a representative of GWFA for AFIN as well as a member of the Producer and User Committee for CFGA.

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

Continue with rotational, swath and bale grazing. Looking forward to receiving the data collected by Ag Canada on the bale grazing study. Hoping to put that Science behind our decisions on what we do in the future. We're looking into planting Tillage Radish, with the hope that it will help improve soil health.



The Grey Wooded Forage Association (GWFA) is located in Rocky Mountain House, AB and works to create awareness of the uses and potential uses of forages and strives to share information on a variety of production practices in the agriculture industry, including:

- * Grazing Management
- * Bale Grazing
- * Swath Grazing
- * Riparian Management
- * Environmental Sustainability
- * Grass Production
- * Pasture Rejuvenation.

