



ALABAMA CHAMPION OF soil health

Charles Holmes
Perry County
2,000 acres grazing land
4,000 acres forest land



Protecting soil health using good grazing practices

In Perry County, Alabama, on a family homestead established in 1819, Charles Holmes, a sixth generation farmer, manages one of Alabama's oldest continuously operated family farms. As the owner of Holmestead Company, he has 2,000 acres in grazing land and 4,000 acres in forest. Charles is not only a farmer, but also a spokesperson for agriculture. He is Chairman of the Perry County Soil and Water Conservation District and is a Board of Director with the National Association of Conservation Districts in Washington, D.C.

The mainstay of his operation is raising purebred horned Hereford and Brahman cross cows and calves that forage on some of the richest soil in the Black Belt. To raise quality beef cattle, Holmes knows that



Moore-Webb-Holmes Plantation is designated a Historic Landmark and Century and Heritage Farm. The public can tour buildings such as the original home site, cotton gin, carriage house, smoke house, plantation store, and blacksmith shop.

he has to intensively manage his pastures to keep his soils healthy.

Holmes is becoming a leader in developing and maintaining well-managed grazing systems. He works to improve the health and vigor of the grass



Prescribed grazing fencing can easily be changed into larger or smaller sections, as needed.

plants, enhance the quality of water running off his property, reduce soil erosion by weather and animals, and improve the soil condition on the land.

Holmes tests the soil in his pastures at least every three years and applies the recommended amounts of fertilizers and other nutrients. He has applied chicken litter on some pastures that were recently converted from cropland, trying to build the overall fertility and soil quality.

Prescribed grazing is an important tool to help me keep my soil and animals healthy.

- Charles Holmes

Holmes uses conservation practices like prescribed or rotational grazing, fencing, and cross fencing. He said, "Prescribed grazing is an important tool to help me keep my soil and my animals healthy. It helps me decrease costs and improves the health and productivity of the forages, soil, and animals."



Existing water troughs were adapted for prescribed grazing and heavy use pads added.

Holmes takes several factors into consideration when alternating between proper resting and grazing forages in his paddocks and moving cattle from one paddock to another in a planned sequence. Some factors include the rate of plant growth, level of vegetative cover, needs of the grazing animal, health of plants and resulting root growth, improved soil organic matter, rain infiltration, and reduced surface water runoff. These lead to healthy soil microbe growth and subsequent quality soil structure, all keys to a healthy soil. Prescribed grazing also promotes uniform animal waste distribution and helps him manage weeds.

Charles places watering troughs strategically on his land. He uses heavy use areas at his watering and feeding troughs to minimize soil erosion and damage around the areas. The availability of water throughout the grazing areas is very important he says because it minimizes the concentrated areas of livestock and enhances nutrient distribution. It also promotes uniform grazing and limits livestock access to sensitive areas.

Holmes has his pastures divided into 8-20 acre paddocks. He can easily subdivide an existing paddock by moving or adding more fencing. He



Steers on fescue.

grazes a paddock for about 14 consecutive days and rotates the cattle based on the forage heights. The pastures are then allowed to rest about five weeks.

Additionally, Holmes manages livestock and forages by using a brix refractometer to check forage sugar levels. Higher sugar levels in forages promote better livestock milk production.

The forages established on the Holmes' farm includes Bermuda grass, eastern gamagrass, switchgrass, Dallisgrass, and fescue. He has many native grasses and forbs that come up voluntarily after prescribed burning. These include eastern gamagrass, switchgrass, little and big bluestem, and partridge peas. Native warm season grasses have deep root systems that hold soil in place and prevent soil erosion. These high quality forages are also drought tolerant, require minimal amounts of nutrients, and are disease resistant making them a valued addition to his grazing system. Native grasses are also important as food and cover for wildlife including bobwhite quail, grassland songbirds, cottontail rabbits, and many small mammals and reptiles.

Holmes has used financial and technical assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service

Borrowed farm philosophy:

"The idea of using the land according to its capability and treating the land according to its needs."

- Hugh Hammond Bennett

(NRCS) to plant grass on 515 acres, install 87,268 feet of fencing, and 20,926 feet of water line on a total of 1,090 acres.

"Following a prescribed grazing management system is just good business," Holmes says. "It helps protect the pastures from erosion, keeps the soil healthy, allows for nutrient distribution, and saves time. It also produces more forage and allows more beef production. It just makes sense economically."

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