Perseverance Pays Off

Harpers Diversify to Keep Farm Thriving

Above: Hannah and Brian Harper and their two daughters, Cheyanna (age 8) and Adaya (age 5), overlooking their rotational grazing acres.

Hannah Harper grew up helping her father, Neil Papendorf, farm 160 acres on their property in Tigerton, Wis. Her father ran the dairy for 30 years and in 2008, Hannah and her husband, Brian, purchased the farm. That same year, milk prices crashed and the Harpers were faced with new challenges in trying to keep their small dairy productive and profitable. Hannah explains, "It taught us how to be savvy; we realized really quickly, we had to diversify our farm to keep it going and maintain success." Hannah followed in her father's footsteps working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to diversify their dairy by adding managed rotational grazing.

The dairy farm is located in the Pigeon River Watershed, and is directly next to headwater of the Pigeon's north branch, which includes many springs. The Harpers had a unique opportunity to install conservation practices to help the watershed. Hannah's father worked with NRCS in 2001 to complete a nutrient management plan and install a barnyard system, including a sediment basin, filter strips, underground outlet, and roof runoff management. "My father did projects with NRCS because the farm is so close to the river and we knew we could make a difference. The main exit for the cows to head out to pasture is right next to the springs on our property," explained Hannah.

Hannah watched her father complete successful projects with NRCS and she and Brian wanted to continue those conservation efforts. In 2010, the Harpers enrolled in the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to complete a comprehensive nutrient management plan, install a larger manure storage, underground outlet and manure transfer. "When we decided on the manure storage, we focused on writing a good nutrient management plan," explained Hannah. "A spring runs right beside the dairy barn and is the headwaters to the north branch of the Pigeon River Watershed; that's what we aimed to protect by installing the manure storage. Hannah and Brian are in a vulnerable area and knew they had an opportunity to protect it and improve water quality downstream," said Waupaca County District Conservationist, Lisa Neuenfeldt. "Hannah attended a Waupaca County sponsored education class and wrote her own nutrient management plan." Hannah explains further, "Understanding where nutrients are in pin-pointing gallons per acre, I made a flow rate graph with speeds to run the tractor to spread at the right rate." Once the Harpers had a good foundation set for the dairy, they were ready to diversify their operation.

In 2013, the Harpers decided to diversify their farm and start Harpers Countryside Cuts, a custom meat processing business. Brian grew up on a hobby farm and processing plant; he also completed a federal apprenticeship to learn how to cut meat. "After the market crash, one of the ways we diversified was by starting our own processing facility; we have two full time staff, Leroy and Anne, that help in the meat shop," said Hannah. The Harpers sell many cuts of meat and also process sheep, hogs and beef. "Our goal is to raise, market and sell grass fed Angus, as well as Piedmontese," explained Brian. The Harpers currently care for 40 milk cows, 40 sheep, 25 young stock/Holstein calves, and 35 beef cattle.

The Harpers also decided to diversify their conventionally cropped corn–hay rotation. In 2014, they enrolled in EQIP and implemented cover crops on almost 30 acres. In 2015 and 2016, the Harpers used EQIP for forage and biomass planting, fencing, livestock pipeline, heavy use area protection, watering facilities, and prescribed grazing. The grazing system included a forage planting of the Grassworks Blend, which includes meadow fescue, festulolium, perennial rye, red clover and white clover. "The mix came in really well as we worked to increase our herd," said Brian. "Hannah and Brian planted the Grassworks Grazing blend and also added clover as part of the EQIP Honey Bee Initiative," explained Lisa. "All our acres are now set

Left: The Harpers viewing their grazing heifers.

Right: The Harpers inside Countryside Cuts.

Below: (L to R) NRCS Soil Conservationist Derrick Raspor and District Conservationist Lisa Neuenfeldt measure forage. The Harpers in front of their business. Sheep grazing on the Harper farm.

up in rotational grazing," said Hannah. They also partner with a local landowner to have 122 bee hives on their property. The bees are thriving on the property due to the pollinator specific clover plantings on the grazing acres. "We started with just a dairy herd and breed in some beef. I have a passion for Piedmontese beef, so it's something we have really enjoyed doing," said Brian. The Harpers have attended many pasture walks and work to meet people interested in managed grazing to build a network. "We purchased a flock of sheep and also recently purchased a herd of Angus beef from a couple in our grazing network. They have an incredible angus herd and write grazing management plans, so they are a huge resource," said Hannah.

"We did a forage analysis last year between two fields, a second year established alfalfa stand compared to a first year grass interseeding with the Grassworks blend. We have the same feed quality and higher digestibility with the Grassworks seeding. That convinced me we can keep interseeding the Grassworks blend," said Brian. The Harper's dairy cows need higher protein and quality feed for energy and milk production. The grazing plan they follow is also good feed for grass finishing beef. "The cows just came in last night 2 hours early with full bags for milking; the high quality feed is working and our animals are thriving," explained Hannah. The Harpers also installed woven wire fencing for the sheep flock, a headlock system for the heifers, and are working on adding water lines in some of the new paddocks. Now that the whole farm is in pasture, cover crops are no longer needed.

The Harper's acres consist of a sandy, gravel-based soil. "It's dry, and every year we were waiting for rain when we cropped the fields," said Hannah. The couple went to a field day and saw an NRCS soil health presentation by Ray Archuleta, Soil Health Specialist, including soil test demonstrations. "NRCS showed us the benefits of rotational grazing and what we could do for soil health," said Brian. "The practices NRCS has helped us install give us a plan for our overall farm and it gives us a hope to stay here for the future and continue to be productive," said Hannah.

Hannah and Brian's daughter, Cheyanna (age 8), brought home a book about the dust bowl from school. "That's why I have Cheyanna and Adaya (age 5) home for this special story today; conservation is so important and that was a tremendous incident. Our kids need to know and understand how to conserve; it's about land stewardship and the animals too. For us to be able to put this land into managed grazing, we are really passionate about it and our kids see the value. The history of what happened then, the effect it had, and how far we've come as a nation is monumental," said Hannah. "I didn't think about the importance of dirt before, now I love the soil. I get excited when I see new species on the property, the little things you didn't notice before building up the land; I am working towards that every day."

"The local NRCS office is great to work with. Waupaca County farmers are very fortunate to have great NRCS and partnering staff," said Hannah. The Harpers agree, working with NRCS took some of the risk away from making a change. "NRCS is here to help farmers transition and try something new; that's very important because most farmers are nervous to try new things sometimes and NRCS gives us more of an opportunity to succeed," explained Hannah. Lisa comments further, "Whenever we have a contract with Brian and Hannah they get things done ahead of schedule, done right, and professionally. It's been a pleasure and we look forward to working with them in the future, providing assistance to help reach their farm goals."

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