The farming question for me and a question for many Kentucky farmers was and persists to be What can you do on a farm defined as an “outer KY bluegrass hill farm,” suitable only for grazing to make it increasingly productive and increasingly profitable.

The description of the topography of this 375 acre Harrison County Kentucky farm (30 miles north of Lexington and 60 miles south of Cincinnati) would be from rolling to moderately steep, and then on to steep. About 80% of the farm falls under the steep headings. Most of the soil falls under the description of clay, stones, erodible, shallow, and droughty with low yield potential. Put simply, soils and terrain not suited for cultivation.

There is 15% to 20% of the land which would classify as rolling acres with more favorable soils than the hillsides. We sort of consider our rolling acres as our “level” fields. It adds up to a grazing type of farm. Plows and cultivators have not done any favors for this type of land, and for me, at this location, are considered tools of the past.

Burley tobacco was a viable row crop raised on this farm for as long as anyone can remember. The farm has eight tobacco barns and some more have fallen down. The burley base probably averaged 6 acres during my ownership. Enough acres could be found on this type of farm for Burley with good production and income potential. However, the quota system of raising Burley has been legislated away and today’s production factors make it impractical to raise Burley on this limited type of hill farm. This is a way of saying that grazing and cattle have become more important than ever on these types of KY farms. There are many farms somewhat similar to this one in Northern and Eastern Kentucky. As you drive west from here the state begins to level out.
On this farm there are:

21 Fields Grazing Only (Too steep/rugged for hay, etc.) 193 Acres
19 Fields Hay/Grazing (Grass or Grass/Clover) 122 Acres
 6 Fields Alfalfa/Grazing 30 Acres
 4 Fields Woods 12 Acres
 1 Field CRP 6 Acres
 1 Field Wildlife Management Area 12 Acres
52 Fields Total 375 Acres Total

Our farm purpose is to make “HillTops Grazing Farm” as “Cattle Big” as possible through improved and improving practices.

Here is a list of a dozen of our important practices that we use to improve things along with my grade and comment on that practice.

1. “Use border collies to aid in cattle movement” – gets a grade of “A” because I love em for helping work cattle.

2. “Certified for Performance and Health Calf Sales” – gets an “A-” because we do a pretty good job preconditioning our calves. These sales are considered a necessity and not an option because they bring in extra money and helps meet our concept of adding value and being “Cattle Big.”

3. “Always have feed, water and high quality minerals in front of cattle” – get a “B-” because I am a little erratic about keeping the minerals caught up with the cattle.

4. “Backgrounding all calves to a minimum of 600 pounds” – gets a “B-“ because there is still too much weight spread (inconsistency) between calves in my calf program. There still are some small ones at weaning that are a challenge to get to 600 pounds. Selling in a CPH sale helps here because the calves are commingled in the sale by size. That keeps you from selling calves as singles, which is always money in the pocket.

5. “Pregnancy check cows every year” – gets a “B-“ because I am still trying to make excuses to keep cows on the farm that should be culled, however, I am getting there (i.e.: Get them off the farm before they get you.)

6. “Cross Breeding” – get a “C” because it is hard to make a decision on exactly what you need to do.
7. “Electric Fence” – gets a “C” because it is the only way to go in intensive grazing, but keeping electric fence hot and effective is a constant problem.

8. “Soil testing and fertilization” – gets a “C” because I am always “dragging my feet.”


10. “Rotational grazing” – gets a “C+” because of my timelines of moving cattle is not so good.

11. “Alfalfa in all fields where practical and possible” – get a “B” which is up from a “D” because I got a couple of more Alfalfa fields established. All Alfalfa is no-till to decrease the danger of erosion.

12. “Stockpile for early winter feeding” – also gets a “C” because I am always 15 to 20 days late getting the nitrogen on, but stockpiled fescue gives the cows an excellent high quality feed boost going into winter.

13. There are many other practices such as pelvic measuring heifers, etc., but these 12 are enough to establish the drift for improved and improving management.

So where are we? We have land that probably at best gets a rating of “D” and a set of fairly good practices, promoted extensively by extension and publications, on the farm which as practiced deserve an overall rating of about B- or C+.

On the plus side, I am a member of the University of Kentucky Bluegrass Farm Analysis group. Therefore, I do possess objective information and comparisons that display “how well” the farm cattle operation is doing in meeting our concept.

Keep in mind that Kentucky farmers who pay to see production numbers through “Farm Analysis” are usually considered to be among the more progressive Kentucky farmers. The average statistics, therefore, from this group would probably be a higher average than an overall average of the state farms.

In 2006, “HillTops Grazing” total returns per cow in the category “beef cow herds – calves backgrounded” was $848. The average returns per cow in this category per farm on UK analysis farms was $557 per cow. Advantage to HillTops $293 per cow.
In 2005, total returns per cow for HillTops was $600 and the average UK analysis farm was $386. Advantage to HillTops Grazing $214.

In 2004 total returns per cow for HillTops was $776 and the average UK analysis farm was $635. Advantage to HillTops Grazing $141 per cow.

In 2003 total returns per cow for HillTops Grazing was $603 and the average UK analysis farm was $499. Advantage to HillTops Grazing $104 per cow.

There are many other categories of comparison such as “returns above feed.” In 2003 HillTops Grazing return above feed was $355 while the average Farm Analysis farm was $210. Advantage to HillTops Grazing $145 per cow.

I think that there is enough evidence presented here to make a point. My point is that if you can take this type of marginal hill farm and achieve the performance numbers mentioned by using commonly promoted practices – as best you can - then what could be achieved on higher quality land with a high level of implementing and fulfilling these practices.

Bottom line: there is a lot of room for KY cattle farmers/ranchers to improve our cattle production and, by doing so, improving our well being and the amount of dollars coming in from our cattle operations. These commonly touted practices will work and will pay off.

I know that over the years, I have left a lot of dollars on the table.