Forage Spokesman Information
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 states farms.

In 2005 “HillTops Grazing” total returns per cow in the category “Beef Cow Herds - Calves Backgrounded” was $600. The average returns per cow in this category per farm on UK analysis farms was $386 per cow. Advantage to HillTops Grazing $214 per cow.

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

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 high quality land with a higher quality of fulfilling these practices.

Bottom line: there is a lot of room for a US 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. A lot of these touted practices work and pay off.

I know that over the years, I have left a lot of dollars on the table.
I am the owner and manager of Rolling Acres Farm located in Woodford County, Kentucky. The total farm operation consists of 250 acres, 95 of which I own. I run a cow/calf operation consisting of 27 cows and calves, and a hay enterprise. The hay enterprise includes 18 acres of alfalfa, 60 acres of Timothy, and 100 acres of grass that is marketed to area horse farms.

I have attended the master cattleman, advanced master cattleman, and master grazer programs offered through the extension service. As a result of what I have learned in these courses, I built two hay storage facilities with the capacity to store over 450 round bales and implemented a rotational grazing system for the cattle. I used to take forages for granted (with the exception of alfalfa), but I have learned that even the cattle pasture is a crop and must be managed as such.
Our beef cattle farm is operated on the principle of less is more. With 34 head of mixed angus, Hereford and limousin cows and calves, currently grazing on about 100 acres, of hillside and forest, we try to get all we can out of the pasture.

We have a goal of raising natural freezer beef with a minimal amount of labor and capital involved in the process. At the moment there is no tractor or implements on the farm. We hire a local farmer to do custom baling, and hire bush hogging done on an annual basis.

While we don't recommend this method for everyone, it is fairly doable for small farming some operations. I will share the financial numbers during my presentation.

We have been fortunate to have only 4 steers the past 2 calving seasons. Fortunate, since we are trying to grow the herd to about 40 cows. we harvest the steers at about 900 lbs, at 1.25 per lb. Plus processing. This is about 40 cents per lb. above market price.

We maximize that by keeping them on pasture until 6 weeks prior to harvest. We finish them on corn/soy bean meal and free choice hay.
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Mac farms with his wife, Ann Bell Stone, and her family in Scott Co. Ky. Together, we produce certified organic poultry, beef, vegetables, and tobacco. All poultry are raised in moveable shelters and electric enclosures on pasture in a semi-synchronized system of grazing with the sheep and cattle. Some vegetables are raised for the commercial market, lamb, and tobacco is produced sustainably. On farm composting and pasture rotation has helped us to reduce off-farm inputs for this 375 acre operation. Primary markets include farmer's markets, CSA, restaurant delivery, and commercial contracts. Mac also works for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture as Director of the Value added Plant Production Division. Program areas include ornamental horticulture, grape and wine industry development, farmers market activities, organic certification, “Kentucky Proud” buy local campaign, grape and wine council, ginseng, farm to school, and forage testing.