

Going Against The Grain

Southern Illinois Farmers Find Success In Conventional Hay Production With A Twist

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ATLANTA, GA.

Dairyman Dan Potthast just finished his best three-year run on the family farm. He did it going against the grain. In Southern Illinois, where corn and alfalfa is king, Potthast is feeding his herd on fields of tall fescue and clover.

“For more than 25 years, I grew corn and alfalfa to feed my cattle just like everyone else around here,” recalled Potthast, standing in a lush field of livestock-friendly fescue and white clover on his hilly 200-acre dairy farm in Carlyle, Illinois. “I got burned out fighting the weather, the pests and erosion out here,” Potthast added, recalling the storms and rains that ruined his crops and stole his sleep. “Heavy rains washed out my newly planted corn and alfalfa fields. I had to find a better way, a better balance for my farm and my life.”

Potthast turned to local seed dealer and cattleman Cliff Schuette for advice about nine years ago. Schuette recommended a newly developed toxin-free fescue called MaxQ, capable of holding Potthast’s rolling farmland in place and feeding his herd of 170 cattle.

“I was skeptical at first. And my veterinarian and neighboring farmers had a fit when we replaced corn and alfalfa with fescue,” Potthast said with a grin, estimating he now has nearly 100 acres planted in the breakthrough MaxQ fescue that offers the persistence of Kentucky 31 without the harmful effects on his cows and dairy business.

“I’m more of a grass farmer than a grazer,” explained Potthast, who cuts and stores his fescue conventionally and relies on it as a mainstay ingredient along with corn silage, brewer’s grain, cotton seed and molasses in a healthy, twice-a-day feed mixture.

“Sure, I’ve produced more milk in years past, but my business has never been more profitable than it is right now,” said Potthast, whose 2009 success comes despite one of the wettest springs he can remember. “My fescue fields take the weather out of the mix for the most part and allow me to harvest even when the grass is wet,” added Potthast, claiming his daily production of 50 to 60 pounds of high quality, high butter fat milk yields him a bigger payday than when his farm produced a lot more milk.

“My inputs, equipment, labor, fuel and vet costs, not to mention my blood pressure, are all down dramatically since I made the switch to this animal-friendly fescue,” explained Potthast, who harvests his fields two or three times a year and never sprays them. “We graze our dry cows year round and stockpile the fields for winter grazing. The operation is that simple without all the problems and expenses associated with high production,” Potthast explained, mixing a morning batch of feed.

Sheep farmer Terry Becherer is also making the most of the MaxQ fescue on his 40-acre farm in the town of Trenton. “The price and competition for ground around here is tough, so we’re stuck with 40 acres. That’s why it’s so important to get more out of the fields we have,” said Becherer, who has more than 200 sheep grazing his persistent grasslands and at least 100 dry sheep and 60 lambs feeding on MaxQ hay in his barns. “We’re getting nearly three times the grazing days with MaxQ compared to our fields of orchard grass. That’s like tripling

the size of my farm,” explained Becherer, claiming erosion control, persistence and labor savings are some of the biggest benefits from his fescue fields.

“We can move the fence lines in fifteen min-



Terry Becherer replaced row crops with livestock-friendly MaxQ fescue to feed his flock.

utes and an acre of the fescue will feed more than 200 sheep for five days,” Becherer said. And his sheep are big eaters.

“Before they ate enough orchard grass to survive, but they didn’t eat enough to flourish. Now they’re thriving on the fescue,” added Becherer, who along with his father, Elmer, nearly put the kibosh on their planned switch from alfalfa and traditional row crops to grass in the fall of 2003. “I’m pretty set in my ways and didn’t want to change, but I’m darn glad we did,” said the elder Becherer, recalling the morning years ago when the flock broke through a fence to avoid a small patch of Kentucky 31 in the far corner of the family farm.

“I’ve always associated fescue with the toxic Kentucky 31,” Becherer recalled, giving his son and dealer Cliff Schuette all the credit for giving the new toxin-free fescue a try. “I’m so glad they got through this hard head of mine. This fescue has been the best thing for our farm operation and for our sheep,” Becherer added.

“Fescue wants to grow everywhere around here. It’s what Mother Nature intended. And now that Ag Research and Pennington Seed have made fescue a persistent and healthy feed option, it’s time to get back to basics without all the chemicals and equipment,” explained Schuette, who first planted MaxQ when it hit the market ten years ago and now sees growing interest in grasslands.

“I’m a big believer in growing year round protein and energy on the farm,” Schuette added. “A good toxin-free, grass-based system is producing healthy forage even in the dead of winter, and that makes for a much more efficient, weather-resistant and profitable business.” Δ

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