

Farmer Spotlight: Madison Cattle Ranchers Reduce Environmental Footprint

THE OWNERS of Deep Roots Meat, LLC, based in Madison County, are taking giant steps to minimize their operation's impacts on the region's land and water resources. Harold Platt and his son Troy are leaders in implementing best management practices (BMPs) that conserve water, protect water quality and raise healthy heifers and steers.

"We want to become more sustainable," explains Troy, of their more holistic approach to ranching. In the Platts' view, economic and environmental sustainability is based on healthy soils, with less dependence on expensive fertilizers and chemicals. As members of the Suwannee River Partnership (SRP), the Platts were honored for their environmental practices at the annual County Alliance for Responsible Environmental Stewardship (CARES) banquet in 2009.

The Platts not only focus on the health of their animals but also on the health of plants and soil. A herd of 600 cattle are exclusively forage-fed and are not given growth hormones or antibiotics. Pesticides and herbicides are not needed most seasons because vigorously growing forages and an abundance of beneficial insects out-compete undesirable plants and insects. They point out the presence of dung beetles and earthworms as evidence of a healthy soil. Cattle are rotationally grazed and a conservation buffer keeps them from affecting the Hixtown Swamp, which is located at one ranch site near Greenville.

In terms of BMPs, the Platts do plenty to efficiently manage nitrogen inputs and water use. They prefer a low-nitrogen, organic fertilizer to feed grass and other forage crops. To offset the low-nutrient



Harold Platt, left, and son Troy Platt are pictured with their cattle which are eating perennial peanut baleage.

content, they plant legumes, a type of forage that needs less fertilizer. "Legumes take up nitrogen from the air and therefore require less nitrogen inputs," said Mace Bauer, who helped the Platts enroll their farm in the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services BMP Program.

The Platts also use technology to protect the environment. Equipment purchased with the help of cost-share funds provided by the SRP includes a sprayer used for fertilizing that targets the plant rather than the surrounding soil. It also has a GPS system that prevents overlapping. A soil moisture probe helps determine when irrigation is necessary. A center pivot, retrofitted for irrigation efficiency, helps reduce evaporative losses.

Speaking recently at the National Grazing Lands Conference in Nevada, Troy

shared his management practices with forage producers from across the country. He emphasized the importance of being proactive in voluntarily implementing BMPs rather than waiting for practices to be mandated. "Troy and his dad recognize the importance of earning a living, promoting farming, and at the same time protecting the environment," Bauer said.

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Suwannee River Partnership's Crop Management School Update

IMPROVING THE efficiency of agriculture leads to a reduction in off-farm inputs, conserves our natural resources and ensures the economic future of farming systems in Florida. Conservation tillage was the focus at this year's annual Crop Management School. Farmers were able to meet and learn from area farmers who have been practicing conservation tillage for years. UF/IFAS Research Specialists and Natural Resource Conservation Service staff also provided a tour and additional information on conservation programs and practices. Many UF/IFAS research programs strive to meet conservation goals through improved soil, cover crop, and nutrient management. We are moving to the next level of conservation by shifting our focus from managing for erosion control to managing for soil quality.

One of our featured speakers was a local farmer Kirk Brock. The Brock Family Farm in Monticello is a leader in Conservation Farming in the Suwannee Basin. Located in Monticello, the Brocks, Kirk and his father Gene, farm about 1,000 acres of rolling hills in Jefferson County. The soils are challenging — sandy topsoil, low natural fertility, and steep slopes. To improve their soils, they have adopted no-till practices in conjunction with a high-biomass rye cover crop. In addition to being progressive in their adoption of best management



practices and conservation tillage, Kirk takes every opportunity to teach other farmers how these practices work on his farm.

In the early 1970s, the soil on Max Carter's farm was eroding at a fast clip. Like most farmers, Carter cultivated his fields nearly year-round, turning the soil to prepare weed-free seedbeds. Like his neighbors, he burned crop residues before each planting so the "trash" wouldn't clog his disk or harrow. After days of planting, when he couldn't see the front wheels of his tractor from all the dust, Carter vowed to find another way. He retained his rotation of wheat, corn, cotton, peanuts and soybeans, but he stopped burning residue. Instead, he retrofitted a planter to create a small bare strip ahead of the seeder and drilled directly into the residue. As he fine-tuned his system, cover crops became an important part of Carter's rotation. He now creates extra residue by growing non-cash crops in the off-season, killing them, and then planting into this soil cover for soil enhancement and weed suppression.

By eliminating burning and consolidating tillage and planting in one field trip, Carter shortened the time between harvesting one crop and planting another. Carter defines profitability in his system by the amount of inputs — fewer inputs equal more profit. Carter's no-till practices have dramatically reduced soil loss from his farm. In the process, crop residues boosted the organic matter in Carter's soils. Since the higher organic matter improves his soil quality and water retention, he has cut his irrigation costs significantly. Higher soil quality also provides more fertility for the next crop. Carter relies on spot spraying rather than cultivation to manage problem weeds, and his herbicide use has not increased in the no-till system. Max speaks with pride about the quail and other birds that have returned to his land, finding cover among the residue on his fields.

These farmers are truly conserving our natural resources. To them conservation is more than just a word, it's a way of life and it's forever.



Kirk Brock shares his conservation tillage practices with other farmers.



Dr. Danielle Treadwell discusses cover crops.

SRWMD Governing Board Gets Glimpse of BMPs

DARRELL SMITH, Suwannee River Partnership (SRP) coordinator, reported on the SRP and implementation of best management practices (BMPs) at area farms during a Suwannee River Water Management District Governing Board workshop in March. SRWMD board members and staff then toured two farms to see BMPs in action. Kelly Philman's farm in Bell was the first stop on the tour. There, the group learned about fertilizer and irrigation management and tools to

implement such practices, such as soil moisture probes and GPS equipment. Next, they visited North Florida Holsteins, also located in Bell. Dave Temple, the manager of the dairy, showed the group BMPs related to waste management and irrigation efficiency. The dairy is experimenting with subsurface irrigation, a type of drip irrigation used underground.



Kelly Philman, a progressive farmer in the SRP, welcomes visitors to his farm in Bell.



Mace Bauer of UF/IFAS gives a presentation to SRWMD Governing Board members and staff about irrigation system efficiency and other crop tools.

Partnership Holds "Progressive Farmer" Meeting

ON JANUARY 20, 2010 the Partnership held its annual "Progressive Farmer" meeting to provide an update of critical water issues, to discuss new conservation measures, and to get input from farmers on these items.

The Partnership identified leaders in the crop industry a number of years ago to serve as "Progressive Farms" to help demonstrate the best management practices (BMPs) from the Vegetable and Agronomic BMP Manual and from other sources. These farmers have been crucial in making sure the BMPs work, as well as helping show other farmers they work. They have hosted field days and other public education programs on their farms.

During the meeting in January, Rich Budell, director of the Office of Agriculture Water Policy (Florida Department of Agriculture) and Drew Bartlett, assistant director for the Division of Watershed Management (Florida Department of Environmental Protection) updated the farmers on EPA's proposed Numeric Nutrient Criteria. Mace Bauer of the BMP Implementation Team provided an update of "Progressive Farm" work, and UF Professor Dr. David Wright discussed the benefits of sod-based rotation and conservation tillage.

Dates to Remember

- Apr. 12-13 Florida Food Summit**
Gainesville, FL. For more information call (352) 392-7581; email info@sustainability.ufl.edu
- Apr. 12 Northeast Florida Private Pesticide Applicator School & Examinations**
Bradford County Extension, Starke, FL. Call the Bradford County Extension Office at 904-966-6224 to pre-register before April 9th.
- Apr. 13 From Cattle Producer to Meat Marketer**
Gainesville, FL. To attend this event please call the Suwannee Co. Extension Office at 386-362-2771 before April 8, 2010. For more information visit <http://nfbfg.ifas.ufl.edu>
- Apr. 20-21 Building Your Own Farm's Food Safety Manual and Plan: Watermelon Growers only, Farm and Ranch plan**
North Florida Research and Education Center, Live Oak, FL. For more information: 386-362-1725 ext 109 Lydia Von Borstel or ext 101 Karen Hancock
- Apr. 22 Green Industries Best Management Practices Training**
8:00am - 3:30pm. Training held at the Wind Mitigation and Resource Conservation Building 3111 Agricultural Center Dr. St. Augustine, FL. 32092; 904-209-0430; e-mail: sewards@ufl.edu. Cost: \$25.00 includes materials & lunch. Pre-registration is required. Pre-payment guarantees your lunch.
- Apr. 27-28 Building Your Own Farm's Food Safety Manual and Plan: Mixed Vegetable Growers, Farm and Ranch Plan**
North Florida Research and Education Center, Live Oak, FL. For more information 386-362-1725 ext 109 Lydia Von Borstel or ext 101 Karen Hancock
- May 4 Forest Stewardship Workshop, Diversify Income from Your Land**
DeFuniak Springs, FL. Call 850-892-8172 to register.
- May 4-5 Building Your Own Farm's Food Safety Manual and Plan: Packing House Plans**
For all watermelon and mixed vegetable growers. North Florida Research and Education Center, Live Oak, FL. For more information: 386-362-1725 ext 109 Lydia Von Borstel or ext 101 Karen Hancock
- Jul. 31- Aug. 1 Florida Small Farms & Alternative Enterprises Conference**
Kissimmee, FL. For more information contact Karen Hancock or Laurie Osborne at 386-362-1725



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districts:
Alachua, Dixie, Gilchrist, Hamilton,
Jefferson, Lafayette, Levy, Madison,
Santa Fe, Suwannee

The following county commissions:
Alachua, Bradford, Columbia, Dixie,
Gilchrist, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lafayette,
Levy, Madison, Suwannee, Taylor, Union

The following cities and towns:
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High Springs, Lake City, Live Oak,
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