“Success” is “making progress” towards what you want from life, said Ben Bartlett, long-time livestock Extension educator in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, and a pasture-based sheep and cattle producer, who combines 450 ewes with a 200-head beef stocker operation.

“Planning for success” with grazing was Bartlett’s focus at the Indianhead Sheep Breeders Association’s Shepherd’s Clinic last week in Rice Lake, but what he had to say applies to livestock and dairy producers.

This veterinarian and Holistic Management Certified Educator has traveled in some of the major grazing and sheep and cattle-production countries in the world, including Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Argentina. After 30 years in the sheep business this spring, this Traunik, Michigan producer has developed a reputation for his practical insights and is a popular presenter at dairy and livestock grazing meetings throughout the country.

Bartlett prefaced his grazing goal-setting presentation by conceding that grazing “doesn’t have a lot of pizzazz” (at least for producers unfamiliar with the system). “It’s not like a new tractor,” he noted.

However, with rising input costs—like $7 corn and $4 diesel—Bartlett reminded both conventional and grass-based operators that the allure of grazing is probably greater than ever. “If you’re in sheep (or dairy or beef), you’re in the forage business, and you ought to be thinking of grazing,” Bartlett encouraged.

“Nobody has increased the cost of sunlight.”

Bartlett defined grazing as “resource conversion—sunlight to grass to animal products” for the farm family’s benefit. Success with grazing requires planning, Bartlett stressed, defining planning as “creating expected outcomes from written predetermined activities.” There’s the kicker—writing it down.

After years of farming, many producers maintain everything is up in their heads. Bartlett argued that goals and written plans (even simple ones) are the necessary—and often missing—elements for success (i.e. making progress towards what you want from life). “It’s a direction—not a destination,” he stressed to producers. (Bartlett knows it’s tempting to think in terms of “if only.” Enjoy the journey in farming instead.)

“Your goal should have a triple bottom line”—quality of life, satisfying and rewarding work and a legacy to be proud of,” he explained.

Again, Bartlett reminded producers, “You work towards a goal.” A goal is a “direction” to move toward in your operation—not a “destination.”

As for planning, Bartlett told producers, “If you are happy where you are at, you don’t need to change.” But “if you want something different,” you’re going to have to. Stupidity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. If you truly want different results—a bigger margin maybe or less of a workload—the first “and most important step” is deciding what you want things to be like, said Bartlett. Going to grazing might just move you in the direction of your primary goal.

The most three important questions in planning for change in a farm operation are: “If there were no limitations,” how would you spend your time, what could money do for you, and how will you be remembered?
“If you are in the ruminant livestock business, forage feed is your biggest cost”—over 50 percent of total cost for the year on many farms, said Bartlett. It’s the quality of the forage that has a major impact on productivity—pounds of beef, milk or lamb, the condition and health of your stock and their level of performance. However, he also said there’s a lot of medium-quality hay made in the Upper Midwest. Managed grazing, most of the time, will provide lower-cost and higher-quality forage.

He encouraged his shepherd audience last weekend to let the sheep select what they want to eat out there (within producer perimeters, of course) and let those ewes have the job of taking care of their lambs on pasture.

If anything, making hay can be somewhat of an “Achilles heel” in making progress in grazing, as many producers like to make hay and have hay-making to fall back on. They can get away with sloppier grazing management because of that stored feed.

Bartlett views mechanically harvested forage as a supplement to grazing; pasture must be viewed as the primary crop for true progress.

So, “how’s our grazing?” he posed.

After traveling the country and internationally, Bartlett has some “bad news.” He maintained:

• Most U.S. graziers are not using new technology
• Most aren’t using new knowledge
• There’s too much emphasis on growing more forage (and what topics like hot new varieties to plant)
• They need better harvesting systems and plans
• They need to work with the land
• They need to appreciate what’s below the soil surface more (Pasture isn't hydroponics, said Bartlett. Soil is “living creature down there” and how the forage above is managed impacts the health and vigor of that underground system, he noted).

There’s also good news. “We have lots of room for improvement,” he said tongue in cheek.

Bartlett thinks U.S. graziers can take a lesson from the Aussies, who use satellites to track their forage yields (i.e. new technology), from the UK which has the British Grassland Society that’s helped elevate grazing to a highly respectable method to produce beef, lamb and milk. And, he pointed out, New Zealanders “know their pasture numbers” (in terms of tons of available feed in their paddocks) n not unlike U.S. corn growers can look at their fields before harvest and “know their yields.” When graziers—even experienced ones—look across their pastures, “what can we say about them?” challenged Bartlett of honing that knowledge of available feed out there.

So why don’t graziers do more serious (written) planning? There are lots of reasons, said Bartlett. The old way has been working. Weather is too variable. There are no common standards of success in a system
that hasn't gotten the level of respect it deserves within the ag industry—not like alfalfa, corn and beans. There needs to be more emphasis, as noted, on pasture yield, and graziers learning numbers like pounds of forage, meat or milk per acre.

The list of excuses continues. Some graziers say it's too much time and paperwork. Others simply don't see any value in planning. They “can't waste daylight—they could be working,” he quipped. However, sitting down prior to the cropping/grazing season and doing some serious planning and goal-setting is some of the most important work to do on the farm.

For those brave enough to sit down at their desk, or across the kitchen table with their spouse, the aim is to get “the right balance of doing the right thing” (i.e. planning) and doing things right (i.e. execution and grunt work, like finally getting in some better fencing).

*Editor’s Note: Next week Bartlett holds out four levels of grazing planning, from “in my head” and “hope for more rain” on one end to detailed Holistic Management planning grazing on the other.*

Better grazing will come “one producer at a time,” says Ben Bartlett, a nationally known pasture-management expert from Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

Bartlett spoke recently at a shepherd’s clinic in Rice Lake. To make serious strides as individual producers, and a grazing industry as a whole, demands some serious planning ahead of the season.

Bartlett, who returns to the state next month to headline at grazing meetings in Eau Claire and Spooner, advocates “planned grazing”—not just in producers’ heads either, but on paper.

A veterinarian, Bartlett is a long-time livestock Extension educator with Michigan State University, who also raises 450 ewes and a couple hundred head of stocker cattle on pasture (Log Cabin Livestock in Traunik in the UP).

He’s after improvements in grazing—through better use of technology and knowledge acquisition—and elevating the status of pasture to that of other crops. But for that to happen, graziers must want to change, make a plan and put that plan into action.

There are a couple of challenges to planned grazing that beginners need to be aware of and veterans need to be reminded of. One is that grazing is “balancing,” says Bartlett, “of the plant community and grazing stock ‘needs’ with your desires (i.e. goals).” The pasture plant’s goal is not to be bit off by a cow, but does the cow really care that plant is too short? Of course not. She wants the good stuff (the tender new growth). As a result, pasture plants keep getting weaker, their root systems smaller. What’s underground in a pasture (root mass) mirrors growth above ground.

The other challenge is picking the right “tool” for the job. Grazing systems are your primary tool and they range from very simple to very complex, says Bartlett of everything from set stocking in one pasture to the very management intense mob grazing—one large herd and many moves per day. In between on the continuum are rotational grazing (moving every week) and management intensive grazing (MIG), which Bartlett defines as moving every three days or less.
He notes that graziers mustn’t think there’s not a place for set stocking, because there is. In sheep production, for instance, many who lamb on pasture employ set stocking for a time just so new families form solid bonds, before initiating MIG for those milking ewes and growing lambs.

“Planned grazing” is “working on the weak link,” says Bartlett. He challenges producers to “try one new thing for your grazing system this summer.”

Beginners might apply technology—like putting in a watering system. Virtually every grazer who has run water out to paddocks freely admits to thinking, “Why didn’t I do this sooner?” Waterlines and moveable tanks “empower you” to accomplish better system-wide pasture utilization.

“Being cheap is not always the lowest cost way to do things,” Bartlett contends, noting there are much better ways to invest your time in your operation and that are far more cost-effective than hauling water.

To experienced graziers, Bartlett says that once “we have used up the benefit of technology, improvement has plateaued.” “Future pasture improvements will come from improved use of existing knowledge,” he says fine-tuning and tweaking the system.

For instance, he’s been improving his use of existing knowledge in his operation by keying in on the fact that there’s an element of “learned behavior to grazing.” Bartlett mentions if he’s going to wean lambs to shelled corn, he dribbles 100 pounds on pasture so the ewes run up and eat it and “the lambs see their mothers eat it.” When he’s ready to take lambs off pasture and grain them, having seen their mothers eat corn earlier in the season helps them “start on feed sooner.”

No one—no matter how long they’ve been at it—should think they’ve arrived. A career in farming—grass-based or not—is a “direction, not a destination,” he says. Producers need to concentrate more on not just enjoying the ride, but driving the train, so to speak, by planning their grazing with goals, strategies and tactics.

Are you satisfied with your current program? To those quick to answer “yes,” Bartlett asks:

• Do you want to graze more days?

• Would you like to run more livestock?

• Do you have a summer slump?

• Do you have weeds or other “issues”?

“Not everyone needs to plan. However, it’s hard to reach a ‘new’ destination without a road map,” i.e. written plan, he contends.

“You need goals. What do you want? What are your weak links?” queries Bartlett. “Write them down—to share, remember, revisit, as a reminder.” For the 2011, jot down one to three goals. Include one for 2015, too.
Maybe one of your goals is to not graze paddocks too short. To sheep producers at Rice Lake recently, Bartlett reminded that productivity of livestock on pasture depends on both quantity and quality of the available forage. Behavioral studies reveal that sheep eat 8 to 8-1/2 hours a day. “If they don’t get enough when they’re grazing, that’s it. If the pasture is too short, they’re hungry,” he says. “They might find quality, but they don’t have enough to eat (when pasture is short).” He challenged producers to go out in their yard with a bushel basket, and with just one hand (simulating a ewe’s mouth), fill it before you mow by ripping the grass with that one hand. Then after you mow, try the same thing; it’s a stark reminder how much work it is for sheep to graze pasture that’s way short. (Grass clippings don’t count.)

Next, you need a strategy for each goal. Bartlett calls strategies “the ‘what’ you are going to do.” So, jot down (one line is all that’s needed) a strategy for each of your goals. Don’t forget a strategy for your long-term 2015 goal either.

Third, you need “tactics” for each strategy. This is “how” you are going to do it—with timelines. Jot down a couple tactics for each of your 2011 goal; again, include tactics for your 2015 goal.

The next steps are to: Plan, execute, monitor and re-plan. And don’t forget to make new goals each year.

Editor’s Note: Next week, Agri-View completes this grazing planning series with Bartlett continuing to explore “weak links” and taking it to the next levels what he calls “planned grazing ‘lite.””

(Last in three-part series)

“It’s hard to reach a new destination without a road map,” says Ben Bartlett, Michigan State University pasture educator and veterinarian of the need for a written plan for each and every new grazing season.

Bartlett utilizes grass-based management on his own sheep and cattle operation, Log Cabin Livestock at Traunik in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. He raises 450 ewes and a couple hundred head of stocker cattle, in addition to traveling nationally speaking to producers about honing their grazing management.

This week Agri-View concludes a three-part series with Bartlett by helping readers identify possible “weak links” in their grazing systems and developing “strategies” and “tactics” for goals they set for the upcoming season. Strategies are the “what” you intend to do to accomplish a goal; tactics are “how” you’re going to get it done. Bartlett says planning “needs to involve the entire farm crew, needs dates/timelines, needs to be realistic—and should be written down.”

Say your goal is to extend the grazing season 30 days to save on the feed bill, and the strategies are to fence and fertilize hay fields. Tactics might be to extend permanent fence and apply 50 pounds of nitrogen per acre on Aug. 1.

Bartlett says one of the goals he set on his farm last year was to provide high-quality “flushing”-level grazing for their ewes from Nov. 1 to roughly Nov. 30. His strategy was to have 20 acres of stockpiled grass and 10 acres of turnips available for the ewe flock Nov. 1. Tactics were: Graze off a grass field and fertilize it with that 50 pounds of N around Aug. 1; spray off another field with Roundup on July 1, till it and plant turnips Aug. 1. By jotting things down, in part, Bartlett says he also remembered he needed to get the disc fixed.
He suggests graziers do just one to three projects a year, but focus their efforts where they'll get the most benefit for their buck, which could be in terms of time management, money or risk. Be creative and involve others; a set of “fresh eyes” is always helpful. Written goal-setting like this is “especially good for people who have grazed the same land with the same animals for many years,” Bartlett maintains. “You know how to graze. This will make you a better grazier.” Writing goals, strategies and tactics down will help you “share, remember, revisit,” he adds. Other possible goals for long-time graziers might be strategies for avoiding the notorious “summer slump” and/or developing a “drought plan.”

The next step up the planned grazing ladder is what Bartlett calls “planned grazing lite.” You still identify goals as discussed above, but you also do a year-round forage plan (not just grazing). You add a field inventory—all possible places to graze and harvest forages. You identify “critical control points”—where and when you want to graze, and where and what you don’t want to graze. Finally, you chart the critical control points.

“Planned grazing lite” is six steps—identify and write goals for grazing and your entire-year feeding plan; create a field inventory chart; identify “important considerations” (i.e., critical control points); a grazing and feed-harvesting plan with critical control points; an “optional” step of filling in “the rest of the grazing and harvesting plan;” and plan review. Tuck each year’s one-sheet grazing/feed management plan into a notebook to save year-to-year.

In creating a field inventory chart, brainstorm all options including your neighbors’ unused pastures, crop residue, annuals, fertilizer, even irrigation. “Important considerations” or “critical control points” to note might include: Lambing or calving, “people vacations,” wet/dry/special pastures, your harvest-or-graze fields and others (maybe where supplying water is a problem or fencing is poor).

The grazing and stored feed plan needn’t be fancy. Jot down on a separate line each of your “fields”—acres, estimated yields, “considerations” (like maybe it’s an “early calving area,” or “graze only” or “hay or graze”). For every field, write down headings: May, June, July, August, September, October (i.e., each month of the grazing season), as well as two “stored feed” categories—“November/December” and “January-April.”

So, for one of his 30-acre “graze only” fields, Bartlett pencils in 18 days under “May,” 18 under “July,” 20 under “September,” and another 18 days under November/December (and makes a note to himself, “depends on snow cover”). For a 10-acre “hay or graze” field with an estimated 2-1/2-ton yield, he fills in the columns: 15 tons harvested under June, seven days grazing in August and another seven days of grazing in October.

To fill out how you’re going to use each field or paddock through the grazing season and beyond, Bartlett says to “work backwards from the critical control points” (important considerations) you’ve first filled in for certain fields during certain months—like Field A, an early calving area, that he knows he’s going to graze 12 days in May, another 12 in June and then use for November-December under snow. He writes in “vacation” in August and “weaning” in October and plans what pastures he’ll need and how many days roughly on each during those “critical control point” times.

“Planned grazing lite” is “management by ‘exception,’” says Bartlett. “It’s a good way to look at total forage supply, and an easy way to manage grazing.” It’s the beginning of long-term pasture-yield measure; “You can’t improve what you don’t measure,” he reminds.
The “optional” Step 5 (i.e. the “rest of the grazing and harvesting plan” he recommends filling in) is especially designed to keep things simple. This information includes: Cow condition scores, reproductive rates, weight gains/weaning weights, milk production levels or other information each grazier might find personally useful to measure his operation’s progress. “Don’t make extra—and frustrating—paperwork,” says Bartlett.

In the Step 6 “review,” revisit the monthly schedule for every field for appropriate grass and legume “recovery times.” Did you identify your “flex” (hay or graze) acres, to build flexibility into the system? What’s your greatest fear—too dry or too wet? Might you have other goals for the year like “graze out” a certain weed or overgraze a certain field for frost-seeding next year.

“You can also use the plan to record actual yields and days-grazing to be used for next year’s planning,” notes Bartlett.

For more information, and a handy one-page “planned grazing lite” worksheet, contact Bartlett at mailto:bartle18@msu.edu or 906-439-5210.

Pasture Like Field Goal Kickers Deserve More Respect Than They Get

If field goals in football were worth six points instead of three, sportscasters would talk more about kickers instead of quarterbacks.

Likewise, if corn was $4 a bushel, diesel was $3 a gallon and equipment costs steep, producers would pay a lot more attention to doing a better job with low-cost pasture.

"Whoa!" says Ben Bartlett, a veterinarian and Michigan State University beef specialist, "Diesel is almost $3 per gallon and corn is over $3.50 per bushel right now. Has your low-cost pasture gained any respect?"

Bartlett says cheap corn and low-cost hay have traditionally prompted producers to bring feed to livestock when livestock "should be going to the feed." Now, however, when livestock producers are competing with ethanol plants for corn, and corn is promising to pull along other crops, including hay, on its ascent to the top of price charts.

Bartlett, along with Rory Lewandowski, an Ohio State University Extension educator in Athens County, Ohio, share some principals for letting your livestock do the work and giving pasture new "respect."

The first thing new serious graziers usually want to know is what to plant in their pastures. "Fence posts" is Bartlett’s answer.

"You would not turn your cows into the whole winter’s bale piles at one time; why do you let your cows wander all over the farm?" he challenges producers who don’t subdivide their pastures. The cattle (or
sheep) are picking and choosing the best feed, letting the weeds grow unchallenged, and they're walking down the rest of the feed that's out there. **Pasture needs time to rest and re-grow. Even two pastures where there was one before is a big improvement and more is better.**

Fence doesn't cost that much, compared to other crop input costs producers are used to opening their wallets for. It "doesn't burn diesel, can last over 20 years and is the most under-used tool" on most livestock operations. He urges producers to talk to a local grazing specialist (located with Resource Conservation and Development programs throughout the state). Cost-share programs are also available.

Bartlett's recommendations are in order of the best return for dollars spent. After fencing, the next best investment is improved fertility.

"The place to start is with a soil test," he says. "It's amazing how many people spend thousands of dollars on fertilizer and have no idea what their pasture fertility levels are, or they have a single nutrient that is a weak link and holding forage growth down and they use no fertilizer."

Triple-20, he says might sound good, but it might also be a waste of some nutrients and poor use of dollars invested, especially when a soil test costs less than $20.

Most pasture costs are fixed costs - taxes, fencing, a watering system, maybe some lanes. If wise expenditures on fertilizer can increase yield, it "dilutes" those fixed costs. For instance, if overhead is $40 on one acre of pasture and yield is one ton, than the cost is $40 a ton. If you put on $20 of fertilizer, you now have $60 an acre invested, but if it'll yield two tons, then the cost is $30 a ton. A ton of pasture, by the way, is 40 to 50 "cow days of grazing" and it takes three acres to get five months of grazing on many pastures.

Soil test, says Bartlett, and make sure potassium or potash isn't your pasture production "weak link."

The next place to spend money on pasture is to get some legumes into grass pastures with frost seeding, which is also known as over-seeding. Bartlett says producers should spread clover seed on spring snow cover while the ground is freezing and thawing on pastures that have good fertility and that have been grazed hard in the fall to weaken existing grass sod.

"Be sure to graze off that first flush of grass to give the little clover seedlings some daylight and less moisture competition," he says.

According to Bartlett, it takes about 100 pounds of nitrogen to grow one ton of forage. For yields over a ton, you either need legumes in the pasture or a thick checkbook to purchase N fertilizer. Nitrogen is good for about 30 days, clover for three years. What's more, legumes also improve the nutritional quality of the pasture for better animal performance.

Bartlett says the last place to spend "hard earned dollars" is to plow, till and plant a whole new pasture crop. There are times, though, when this might be the best option, he concedes, of a field that was in corn or excessively weedy. What to plant? Ryegrass, alfalfa or the new fescues? Bartlett says there's "not a cookbook answer." Again, talk to a grazing specialist.
Some of the new species "look good," Bartlett notes, but are very short-lived. Some take special grazing management. Some, though, will improve a grazing program compared to "starved-out bluegrass pastures" many producers now rely on.

Plowing is expensive, though, so be sure to "have a plan," Bartlett urges. Get fertility up to speed and select the right varieties before you turn a furrow.

Lewandowski echoes Bartlett's advice to "have a plan." This Ohio educator is referring though to the mud and pasture damage that the spring thaw ushers in. He says cattle producers have to protect and renovate their paddocks from the trampling that's going to occur.

Plan No. 1 is to avoid tearing up pastures in the first place. "This plan basically calls for the installation of a heavy use feeding pad and staying on it during wet, soggy periods," says Lewandowski. While this will protect pastures, there are a number of disadvantages, the biggest one being "the expense." This is not a cheap option, especially if sized correctly and built correctly. There may be cost-share money available to help, but the livestock owner's share is still likely to be significant. Another disadvantage is manure disposal. You have a way to clean the pad after the winter season and spread the manure and waste hay somewhere.

Plan No. 2 is "let nature take its course." Winter cows on some bottom ground, some 40 cows on 15 acres of bottomland pasture/hay ground. This is not stockpiled forage. Hay is fed in bale rings, concentrating on about a fourth of the field area each year. What this means is that while cows have access to the entire 15 acres, hay is fed only in about one quarter of the area each year. Within this area, bale rings are moved each time hay is fed so hay is never fed in the same spot twice. The field gets trampled up and the area of the field devoted to the hay rings really gets torn up.

An experienced producer who's done this tells Lewandowski that there was lots of regrowth once the cows left the field about mid-May. There were lots of weeds, like ragweed, pigweed and thistles, too. This producer let the field go until about July that first year and then went out and mowed off the growth that was there. It was slow going because the ground was so rough. Underneath the weeds, grass and clover was growing and the hay made from that field actually turned out to be better than expected. By September the field was back to mainly grass and clover and cows were turned in for about a month of grazing. After, hill pastures were grazed in the fall, the cows went back into that same bottom field for wintering.

Currently, the same quarter portion of the field is used as a feeding area for two winter periods in a row. This producer feels this gives a good buildup of hay mulch and manure and improves the field's fertility. As cows begin calving in the spring, they are removed to permanent hill pastures once the calves are 3 to 4 days old. About half-a-dozen cows are left in the bottom field in May, but by mid-May, the herd is out. The field is left to recover on its own without any smoothing or re-seeding.

When growth is 10 to 12 inches tall this producer Lewandowski knows will either do a grazing pass or mow it off. At this stage it looks poor, very weedy, but, as noted, underneath grass and clover are showing up. Typically by July the cows are turned back into this bottom field, which gets 4 to 5 weeks of grazing, by which time the clover growth is very thick. In fact, the clover growth is so thick that bloat is a concern. He gets another grazing pass in September, and then the field is not used until the over wintering period.
This producer has noticed several things, according to Lewandowski. First, rough areas tend to smooth out with normal grazing over a 1 to 2-year period.

Second, in April, the field looks as though it has been destroyed and grazing is over for the year. However, after the cows leave in early to mid-May, the field always recovers. Yes, it looks bad, with lots of weed growth, but says Lewandowski, weeds grazed young are good forage. Underneath the weed growth, grass - mainly bluegrass, but some orchardgrass and timothy along with red and white clover is beginning to grow.

Third, either a quick grazing pass or mowing can control this weed growth. This lets the grass and clover come through.

Fourth, by mid-July the field is back to predominantly clover and grass and ready for grazing. This seems to violate the grazing principle to protect and build up your sod base, but given this management and rest period, the field recovers and is producing more tonnage than when it was a hay field.

The key is letting the cows have access to the entire 15 acres while concentrating hay feeding in just a portion of the field. The key within the feeding area is to keep moving the bale rings. Admittedly areas where the cattle really tromped up the sod basically turned into a muddy “soup,” and did take longer to recover and possibly could benefit from some re-seeding. However, other areas of the field while looking rough, always recover within the first grazing year.

It should be noted that this is probably not the way to go on hilly pastures where erosion could get started and form gullies with this type of abuse. It works well on bottoms or level paddocks. "So, there it is, one plan for pasture renovation that depends upon winter bale movement management, time and patience," says Lewandowski.

Plan No. 3 is "conventional" renovation. Conventional renovation generally involves either frost seeding or no-till seeding. However, he says graziers who have been rotationally grazing their pastures for at least several years and building up a thick sod are not having a lot of success with frost seeding - even in pastures that have been grazed down close. He attributes this to seed not able to get in good contact with the soil and/or lack of good freeze/thaw cycles. However, frost seeding or no-till seeding may be effective if pasture has been torn up (exposing soil) and it's a hilly pasture with the real possibility of some significant erosion taking place.

Generally frost seeding works best with legumes like red and white clover, compared to the lighter grass seeds.

No-till seeding provides better assurance that seed is placed in contact with the soil, increasing chances for a successful establishment. Under rough soil conditions where cows have trampled the area, it may also provide some smoothing of the soil. If a perennial grass is the target plant, no-till seeding is probably the best renovation option, says Lewandowski.

The disadvantages of no-till seeding are added fuel and machinery expense compared to frost seeding and the need for a favorable seeding window to use the no-till drill. If it's a wet spring and soils don't dry out, there may be no opportunity to seed.
If a hilly pasture paddock has been trampled to the point that erosion is a concern, it requires some intervention by the grazier to reduce or prevent that erosion. Annual ryegrass mixed with the perennial forage can be used in small amounts to provide quick green-up to hold the soil. Other suggestions along this same line would be to use a cereal grain such as oats or rye to provide a quicker cover, as well as some better quality forage while the sod base recovers. Winter wheat could also be used, and seeded in the spring would not head out, maintaining forage quality over a longer period.

In summary, the renovation plan a producer chooses depends upon the severity of the trampling damage and the topography of the pasture. A hilly pasture with severe trampling damage requires some reseeding and use of a quick cover species such as annual ryegrass or a cereal grain in the mix. For a pasture paddock severely trampled but with little slope and erosion concern, you can let nature take its course if you have enough pasture so that the damaged paddock can be given a rest period of 2 to 3 months to recover.

In all cases, producers should make sure pasture fertility, including a soil pH above 6.0 (preferably 6.5) soil P between 40 and 60 pounds per acre and soil K around 300 pounds per acre is maintained. This will give pastures the best chance for recovery whether naturally or through reseeding, as well as help build a more productive sod base, Lewandowski concludes.

**Take a Holistic Look at Farming Decisions**

Albert Einstein once said that people can't solve problems at the same level of thinking with which they created them. Ben Bartlett's a true believer in that idea. A Michigan sheep producer, livestock agent and former Agri-View columnist, Bartlett encourages livestock producers to change their level of thinking when it comes to making decisions to solve problems on the farm.

Speaking at the Indianhead Sheep Breeders Association annual shepherd's clinic earlier this month, Bartlett encouraged producers to make decisions holistically. He described holistic decision making as a step beyond the traditional decision making process.

"We're not throwing out the way we usually make decisions," Bartlett said. "We're just building on that to help us make decisions better." Traditionally, he said, people tend to fix problems by coming up with goals that require specific actions. Producers might consider the opinions and experiences of other producers and experts to determine which routes of action will work best to help them accomplish their goal. For example, say a producer has a problem with lambs dying of pneumonia. His goal is to keep his lambs from dying, so he decides to use a better antibiotic. He checks with his veterinarian and other producers about antibiotic options, decides on an antibiotic he thinks will work, and assumes that he's made a good decision. With holistic decision making however, the scenario is a bit different, Bartlett said.

To begin the holistic decision making process, Bartlett suggests producers identify what he calls a "holistic goal." He combines the two words into one because he wants producers to think of a holistic goal as more than a typical goal.
"A holistic goal is your sense of direction or purpose in life," Bartlett said. "It's what's really important in your life." This goal goes far beyond simply keeping lambs from dying from pneumonia, for example. A holistic goal is a life goal that remains no matter what problem a producer is trying to solve. Determining a holistic goal needs to come before a producer even attempts to solve any problem holistically, he says.

Bartlett told producers to determine their holistic goal by considering three components: quality of life, forms of production and future resource base. When considering quality of life, a producer should ask himself what gives his life value and meaning. "What's important to you?" Bartlett asked producers. "It could be your health, it could be debt-free status, it could be your family, it could be having fun." Specific forms of production allow a producer to achieve the quality of life he's chosen, Bartlett said. Forms of production might help producers do things like manage their time well, profit from farming, or maintain a healthy environment. In turn, forms of production are sustained by a future resource base, Bartlett said. A producer should ask himself how he wants to be remembered in the future. "Do you want to be remembered as a steward of the land, a leader in the community, or in some other way?" he asked producers.

Ideally, producers should write their holistic goals down, Bartlett said. He noted how often we write out grocery lists compared to how seldom we write down life goals. "If you write your holistic goals down, you can't ignore them," Bartlett said. And that's important considering holistic goals become a factor in every decision producers make.

With a holistic goal in hand, a producer can then go about his usual decision making process, Bartlett said. Assuming we have the same lamb pneumonia problem as before, our goal was to keep lambs from dying. Although the goal stays the same under the holistic decision making process, Bartlett suggests producers change the wording. Rather than trying to "keep lambs from dying," Bartlett wants the goal to be reworded to "increase lamb survival." "It's an extremely subtle difference in wording, but an extremely big deal," Bartlett said. He encouraged producers to keep their goals aimed at improving the negative aspects of their operations rather than simply avoiding those negative aspects.

Besides a small change in wording, the goal stays the same whether this producer used his usual decision making process or the holistic decision making process. However, the actions he takes to achieve the goal might change. In this producer's usual decision making process, he decided to use a better antibiotic to keep lambs from dying. Using the holistic process, however, the values of the producer's holistic goal affected the action he decided to take. In this case, the producer's holistic goal was to be profitable and to be remembered as a land steward and good shepherd. Rather than spending money on a new antibiotic that may have cost him some profit, he decided instead to better ventilate his barn and shear his ewes to decrease lambs' susceptibility to pneumonia. Just as he did in his usual decision making process, the producer also checked with his veterinarian and other producers to see whether the decision he was about to make was a practical one.

Testing the decision is an important part of holistic decision making, Bartlett said. He suggests producers ask themselves several questions as to whether the decision they've made both meshes with their holistic goal and has the potential to be a good one. Producers should consider whether the decision will adequately fix the problem, whether it'll provide enough bang for the producer's buck, whether it's a wise use of energy and money, whether it's sustainable, and whether society and culture will approve of the decision. Bartlett also suggested that producers carefully monitor their decision once it's been made.
"In normal decision making, we don't test our decision to see if it's correct," Bartlett said. "We just assume it's correct. What that does is lead to a reactive response." But holistic decision making takes a different approach. "We assume we've made the wrong decision," Bartlett said. "We come up with a system in which we can monitor it to test if we were right." For instance, in the lamb pneumonia case, the producer could use a clipboard to identify whether any lamb losses are due to pneumonia. By assuming the decision he's made is the wrong one, the producer is stimulated to "adaptive action," rather than reaction, Bartlett said.

Bartlett encouraged producers to use holistic decision making as "a tool that can help take you where you want to go." However, holistic decision making is not something that can be learned overnight. "Start today," Bartlett said, "and practice, practice, practice."

http://northernflux.blogspot.com/2013/09/grazing.html

He gave us a handout titled Successful Grazing with Holistic Management that said the goal of the workshop was to make us successful graziers. He said the idea of holistic management came from Allan Savory, in Africa. It's a tool that, used correctly, can help people "achieve an enjoyable, profitable, and sustainable future," as the handout put it. Ben introduced holistic management more from a personal than a planetary perspective, as a way to run a farm that makes money and meets social and environmental goals, kind of like the "triple bottom line" approach of looking out for profits, people, and the planet. He said for a while MSU was giving grants to farmers for various marketing projects, but when they checked back a few years later, many of the farmers had abandoned the projects. Sure, they made money selling at the farmers' market, but they had to get up at 4am every Saturday.

Ben did not push his vision of social goals. He introduced some principles of decision making, like figuring out who needs to be involved in decisions, how much money you have to invest, and what resources are available to you (your truck, or someone who can do chores when you're away, or a source for a new ram). Then he asked us to consider what's important to us: "What do you want out of life?" He gave us a few minutes.

Ben's wife Denise sat in the back of the room. He did not push, I say, except that his and Denise's vision was hard to argue with. We will have a life that is active, productive and always learning... It talked about honesty and integrity, financial security, and a "mutually rewarding marriage." It took them two years to write. Even the way Ben talked about money -- that most obvious of goals -- belied it as a means rather than an end.

He encouraged us to think in terms of goals and whether the things we do help us reach them. He and Denise realized recently they could get by without farming; they considered if they wanted to keep doing it and decided yes. You should run the farm, Denise said. Don't let the farm run you. A man with cracked and dirty hands said he'd heard there's a period of misery at the start of every farm project. "I mean, how long do you let that go?" he asked. Ben said it's important to monitor whether you're meeting your social goals as well as your financial goals.

What you leave behind is really important, he said. You don't want to be the guy who dies with lots of money and is remembered as a cheapskate. He said he wants to help people graze better, and then he gave us a few minutes to imagine our own legacy.
“When you write something down, be careful, because I can flat guarantee it’ll happen,” he said.

If some of this makes Ben sound like an out-of-touch idealist, it shouldn’t. He jokes that he doesn’t want to be remembered as a man who dutifully separated his plastics for recycling, and he is far from a hobby farmer. He and Denise have 400 to 500 ewes and raise 100 to 200 head of stock cattle each year, with only occasional day help. They grow over a million pounds of grass each season.

In Ben’s view, livestock farmers are primarily growers of grass: “It’s all about collecting sunshine to grow the plants to feed the animals to make you money.” The number of animals you have is limited by the amount of feed available (and the opposite, in a sense, but more on that later). He said he would raise camels if they could convert grass to cash better, to which Denise replied that they would not raise camels.

Ben shifted toward the nuts and bolts, presenting us with a blank table in the handout for us to tally our fields, acreage, and estimated productivity in pounds of grass per acre available for grazing each year. I asked how much variability he assumed in grass production and he said fifty percent is not out of the ordinary. Plans are inevitably wrong when you’re dealing with biological systems, he said. We can land the Mars Rover within yards, years after takeoff, but we don’t know if it’s going to rain this afternoon. He seemed okay with that.

We went outside and walked through a gate onto a very green hillside.

“This is some real nice grazing here,” Ben said. There were small patches of brown, and some places with very little grass, but mostly the grass was thick. Little cones of musk ox poop were nearly hidden in the grass. We gathered around Ben, who wore leather boots and Wranglers. “Listen when I shovel,” he said, aiming for a clump of thick grass. He struggled. “You brought me a dull shovel,” he teased the animals’ caretaker, a young woman named Emma. He ran his hands through the wedge he’d cut and explained that it was all grass, several inches down. There was no dirt, and therefore no way for the organic matter to be broken down by bugs and other means.

He talked about watering troughs and how they were “manure magnets” because animals will have a drink, walk twenty steps, and poop. The animals end up transferring nutrients from where they graze to where they poop. Moving the water source can help.

He explained that an uneaten, lush spot was likely a urine spot, and he told the story of a dairy farmer intent on getting his cows to finish a last green strip in a paddock. You got enough room in your milk tank? Ben had asked him. Yup. You got more pasture? Yup. Then move them.

The fact that some spots were grazed low while others were still green suggested the animals were being choosy, he said. If you have eight donuts for nine people, people will grab for them, but if you have dozens for a few people, they’ll get picky. Animals with lots of freedom will form trails; those more confined will spread out evenly.

A graduate student had a special tool that measured kilograms of biomass per hectare, which Ben said is almost the same as pounds per acre. She got about 2,000 kilograms where we were -- an acre’s worth of grass weighed about a ton. Ben said they will graze 400 family units (ewes plus lambs) on eight acres for two days. Assuming a ewe and her lamb or lambs together eat 8 pounds per day, the animals will eat
6,400 pounds over the two days, or 800 pounds per acre. They could keep grazing there, but it’s important to leave some green leaf so the grass can grow back quickly.

Ben explained how they put lambs and ewes on adjoining paddocks after weaning so they can talk through the fence. He made fun of old ranchers who separated calves, branded them, and put them on a new pasture – where maybe on a clear night they could hear their mothers bellowing a half-mile away – and then wondered why they got sick. "I mean, can you stress them any more?" he said.

There was only one time when Ben sounded a little out of his element, like Fairbanks was a long way from the Upper Peninsula. When someone explained that people here think compost just kills the grass, Ben suggested spreading it in fall, after the growing season. A man from the cooperative extensive service said that's not recommended because spring run off will wash it away. Late summer? Ben said.

Emma told me she wanted it to rain because she'd just spread fertilizer.

When we went inside, Ben stressed “pasture walks” as a way to learn from others. Even a veteran farmer will be a beginner if he doesn't try new things or take advantage of others’ experience, he said. “You're not going to get 100 grazing seasons, and you can't learn it from a book.” Try new things, visit other farms. Ben said farmers knew about rotating crops for many many years, but forgot most of it in the Midwest. “You talk to guys in Iowa and they think corn and soybeans is a rotation,” he said, and everyone laughed. It encouraged me to think the passive solar chicken coop we're building might be an experiment we and others can learn from.

Ben explained that grass basically goes through three phases. First it draws on root reserves to get going. Then, once it has some green leaf to absorb energy from the sun, it grows quickly. And finally, when it’s done growing, it reproduces and goes into senescence. (Minus the photosynthesis, it didn’t sound too unlike humans.) He said we should start grazing when the grass has three leaves -- most grasses can support exactly three healthy leaves, although broan grass can have a dozen or more -- and stop grazing when there’s still some green leaf left. The pasture we visited was suffering from grazing deficiency, or too few animals, allowing the animals to be choosy. In some places, they’d eaten the tender new growth in spots they’d already grazed, depleting the plants’ reserves.

Ben asked a man with 18 ewes how many bales of hay he could get from an acre of grass, and the man struggled to answer. For a few years his grass was four feet high, but for the last three years it’s only grown to six inches. A man from Delta Junction said farmers were grateful this year if they had a third their normal production; some didn't even harvest their hay. He said one dairy farmer is already buying round bales from Alberta -- for $300 to $500 a bail.

Ben said it’s important to find your average production and recognize that half the time you’ll be below average. He didn’t mean to be insensitive to Alaskan farmers suffering from a summer without rain. He just meant you have to put up hay in the good years.

At one point, he said, “Nothing is as good as grazing,” and I think he was comparing grazing to buying feed, but it seemed like he could have meant it without any context. There’s nothing as good as grazing.

As we left for the day, it started to rain.
On Saturday morning, we started in the classroom again. Ben said he was up at 4 am thinking about grass. He showed us photos on a PowerPoint of his farm – ewes and lambs in mid-May, sheep and steers separated by five-wire fence, a border collie doing what it was bred to do. The sun was out and the grass was filled with clover and buttercup and dandelion. Visions ran through my head. “This is when you’re really excited about being a sheep farmer,” Ben said. Sometimes they’ll move the sheep as much as a mile -- a thousand animals trotting through the woods, led by a husband and wife and dog. Even five abreast, the animals could stretch a quarter mile.

There was a long discussion on using a self-feeder for loose minerals. (Rain can leach the salt from a salt lick.) I took away that Ben and Denise look for the best product at a fair price and accept that they’ll have to modify and fix it. “If you can’t build something so it won’t break, built it so it will break where you want,” he said.

Now might be a good time to mention Ben’s affinity for aphorisms. I’m actually kind of a sucker for these bits of wisdom -- even when they’re painfully obvious, it would help us all if we actually followed them. Here are a few, from the two days:

You gotta do something different to get different results.

Plans are Nothing; Planning is Everything (attributed to Dwight Eisenhower).

Plans are only Good Intentions unless they immediately degenerate into Hard Work (attributed to Peter Drucker).

Big things never happen. (Keep the big picture in mind, but focus on small steps.)

Slow is fast (when animal handling).

We can only achieve what we can dream.

The one time I questioned this type of thing was when Ben said, “You spend your life doing the means, but the means are not what it’s all about.” I think he meant that raising livestock is satisfying because it makes their life “active, productive and always learning.” But for all his talk about social goals, it seemed odd to downplay the day-in, day-out. If you didn’t like the acts of farming -- or anything else, for that matter -- it’s hard to imagine lasting long enough to reach your goals.

According to Bartlett, grazing is a management system that balances the needs of the plant community with the needs of the grazing stock along with the desires of the management. “The level of grazing proficiency here in the U.S. is low because most in this country are not using new knowledge and advanced management techniques,” Bartlett said. “There is too much emphasis on growing the forage and not enough effort put into harvesting expertise and techniques. We in the U.S. have low harvesting costs and great mechanical harvesting expertise, so there is great potential for grazers to improve on these systems.” Bartlett will stress the importance of four grazing systems: set stocking, rotational grazing, management-intensive grazing and mob grazing."One really needs production and management
knowledge about the plant community, the grazing animals and the people involved,” Bartlett said. - See more at: http://farmworldonline.com/News/ArchiveArticle.asp?newsid=9288#sthash.FiGrcfBy.dpuf

Graziers challenged to plan, take action

DALTON, Ohio — The 50-plus vendors present for the North Central Ohio Dairy Grazing Conference — held Jan. 24-25 in Dalton — offered a wide variety of farm-related products and services. But, according to Michigan dairy grazier Ben Bartlett, the featured speaker for the 12th annual conference, more than half of the products available were really the same thing: new information.

Bartlett said most of what is sold to farmers today is not really a new product, but new information — a new way of doing things we’ve been doing for a long time. While the technology is certainly part of the product, the “human creativity” that went into the technology “is equally important,” he said.

And so it is with most dairy grazing operations. Personal choice usually determines the degree of success or failure, and the more creative and thoughtful, usually the more successful the farm. Bartlett spent the day talking about holistic management — a program for finding the best possible balance for each producer, and maximizing the potential for a successful outcome.

“You take where you want to start out, where you want to end up, and you put in some new knowledge and you put some tools with it,” he said.

Be inspired

Bartlett is a retired grazing educator from Michigan State University, and now works as a veterinarian and a low stress handling and grazing specialist. In his speech about the “blueprint” for grazing, he encouraged producers to be inspired, informed and to take action on their individual farm plan.

In addition to new products, graziers need to explore new ways of thinking, behaving and making decisions.

“It will take new knowledge and skills and a change in your behavior to generate new results,” he said.

He shared a sample copy of a yearly grazing plan, challenging producers to write out their plans and be specific.

Plans should include short- and long-term goals, the strategy and tactics for achieving those goals, and a regular monitoring/assessment as to how well the plan is going.

He said producers should identify their weak links, because those same things are what holds the greatest opportunity, if they are improved.

“Dairy graziers should ask themselves, ‘What are the weak links in 2013 that are going to prevent you from not doing a better job?’ Because, when you think about this, your problems are your opportunities. Your biggest problem is your biggest opportunity.”

I’m Sorry I Made You Cry

By Troy Bishopp

French writer, Antoine Rivarol said, “Heavy hearts, like heavy clouds in the sky, are best relieved by the letting of a little water.” I have seen plenty of this human rain in the most telling
and unexpected places. I’m also not ashamed to have contributed to the water table. Frankly, I don’t know how you can suppress this pressure of emotion. My wife says it best, “Sometimes you just need a good cry.” A good cry? Well, the tear ducts must be pretty well cleaned out after a year like this one.

I’m not too particular or cognizant about what sets me off into the land of weepiness. I cried in a dairy crisis meeting, I shed tears when my daughter graduated from Elmira College, I wept at a Memorial Day service, I caved from emotion after helping a cow with a difficult calving and sobbed during a speech at Toastmasters. I can even snivel when I’m spitting mad. I don’t remember being in this watershed capacity when I was younger, so what has happened to me? Is it my age, gene makeup, daughter’s influence, experience or is it my own agricultural Green Mile and the helplessness I feel from time to time? There’s probably a government study on this somewhere.

My speech coach, Fred, encouraged me to find a way to show emotion and passion. “No better way to impact a story or inspire a group than to make people cry by crying yourself,” says Mr. Orator. Boy did that statement bring back a stark memory. There I was on stage, a total greenhorn, at the Great Lakes Grazing Network Conference in Shipshewana, Indiana sharing the spotlight with Dr. David Zartman, Janet McNally, Ben Bartlett and sitting next to me was the famous Bob Evans. What a moment for an unknown grazier from New York until I happened to look out over the crowd of some 600 people packed into the auction facility. About that time, Mr. Bartlett took me aside and said, “Give the audience something to think about instead of the normal nuts and bolts grazing message.” Ok, I have just the quote for making farmers reflect on a different future.

I stepped up to the mike and read from a 3×5 card with this quote scribbled on it: “My father walked an empty, desolate barnyard, listening for the long – ago songs of life. He heard only a loose sheet of tin roofing curled over, scratching itself distractedly in the wind. He cried. He cried because he no longer had the energy to keep the barn full of life himself. He cried because none of his children were willing to fill it full of life again. He cried because he could not die here on the farm amidst life, as his forbearers had been able to do,” by Gene Logsdon.

As soon as I uttered the words, “my father” I felt sick. I stuttered, choked and my eyes went blurry as I tried to press on knowing I was citing my own worst agricultural nightmare. I stood there at that podium weeping for what seemed like hours. Some kind soul handed me a tissue and in that moment of grief I glanced at the front row to see all the ladies crying and even saw Mr. Evans with his handkerchief. I don’t remember much of my speech after that but when an Amish pastor came up to me and said, “Your exhibition of emotion was a powerful force, you should be proud.” Wow, all that blubbering and I made a difference. I don’t want to go through that again!