

Yon Family Farms:

They're All About Good Stewardship

by Troy Smith

Driving between the South Carolina towns of Aiken and Ridge Spring, travelers often see cattle grazing green pastures — even in February. The Bermuda grass predominant in this coastal plains area usually fades with seasonal dormancy, so lush winter pastures aren't typical. But along that stretch of narrow highway, where it bisects Yon Family Farms, there usually is some kind of green and growing forage.

In beef cattle circles, Yon Family Farms probably is best known for producing Angus seedstock. Located just outside Ridge Spring, the operation markets up to 250 bulls per year, as well as selling registered females.

However, Kevin Yon calls his family grass farmers first and cattle producers second. He says cattle producers can't forget that ruminants were designed to be forage harvesters, and the forage has to come first.

"Cattle producers in the Southeast don't have very many advantages, except a climate that allows us to grow forages for about 10 months of the year. At least we can most years," Kevin says. "We can achieve nearly, but not quite, year-round grazing. And I enjoy managing grazing resources just as much as breeding cattle."

Kevin and his wife, Lydia, are all about optimizing the use of available resources,

but not just for near-term profit. The couple is pretty passionate about using the land in an environmentally responsible way. They believe success, in a business sense, won't be sustainable without a commitment to environmentally friendly management. And they are encouraging their teenage children — Sally, Drake and Corbin — to adopt the same attitude.

"We don't believe you have to choose between doing what's good for the environment and doing what's good for business. You can do both," Lydia says. "We're trying to do the right things for the land and the operation, to make them better, and to pass it all on to our three children."

These folks aren't the kind to brag about it, but their commitment hasn't gone unnoticed. Nominated by the Saluda County Soil and Water Conservation District, the Yon family received the 2008 National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Environmental Stewardship Award for Region II, which includes eight southeastern states. Early this year, Yon Family Farms was named, above six other regional winners, for the national award.

Continuing responsible care

Kevin is characteristically modest about the recognition of his family's environmental stewardship practices and conservation achievements.

"We're grateful. But really, we're not that special," he insists. "A lot of producers are doing many of the same things we're doing. The people that were on this land before us were responsible farmers. What we're doing is just a continuation of responsible care for the land."

Even if they won't admit it, the Yon operation is at least a little bit special. Starting with little, the Yons have built a viable operation in just 13 years — believing profitability and sustainability must go hand-in-hand.

Animal science graduates of Clemson University, both Kevin and Lydia made a start in the Angus business while working for Congaree Farms, near Columbia, S.C. For seven years they managed the firm's purebred Angus herd and developed its breeding and marketing programs. During that period, the couple also acquired an interest in the cow herd. When Congaree's owners decided to exit the purebred cattle business, Kevin and Lydia left with 100 registered cows.

"We had the cows and the desire to go out on our own, but no place to go," Lydia



PHOTO BY TROY SMITH

► National winners of NCBA's Environmental Stewardship Award Program, the Yon family includes (from left) Kevin, Lydia, Corbin, Sally and Drake. Kevin says the family's business associates, as well as Farm Service Agency and NRCS personnel, are partners in the success of Yon Family Farms.

explains. “Kevin was pretty well acquainted with several bull customers around Ridge Spring, and he liked the ag-oriented community. One of the local farmers told Kevin about a house on 100 acres that might be for sale. There were no outbuildings or corrals — just two fenced pastures. But it was available.”

“You’ll never make a go of it,” warned the well-meaning naysayers, but the Yons bought the acreage and leased additional ground from the seller. The couple also agreed to provide care for the same party’s cow herd in return for use of farming equipment.

“They were primarily row-crop farmers and, in time, we leased all of their pasture and hay ground, and bought their cows,” Kevin says. “Since then, we’ve bought a little land from them and others. Another nearby bull customer, upon retirement, gave us a long-term lease on his farm and sold us his cows. We now operate on about 1,500 acres, but we couldn’t have expanded as quickly without the help of these people. They were willing to work with us, and they are partners in any success we’ve had.”

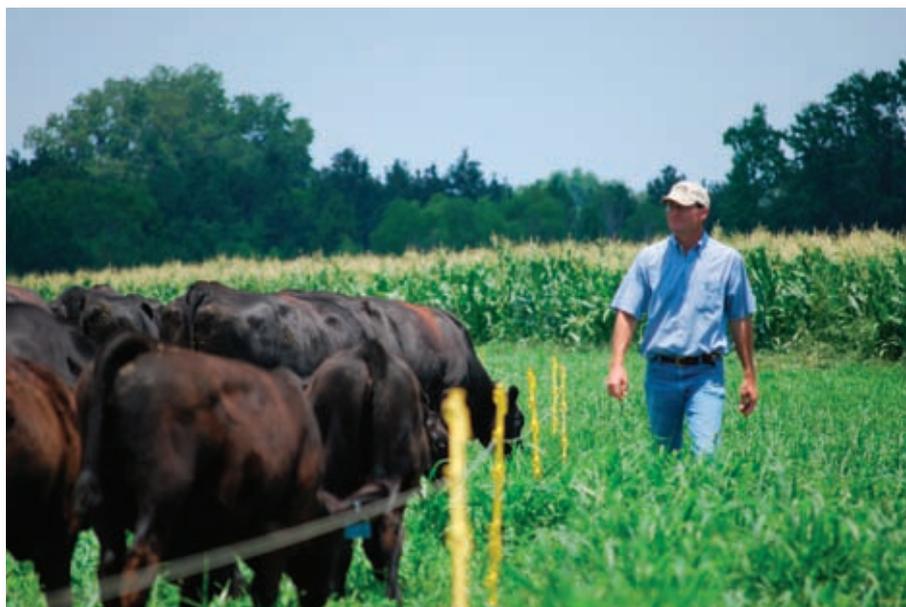
Bread and butter

According to Kevin, the bread-and-butter forage on the area’s permanent pastures is Bermuda grass. It grows well in sandy coastal plains soil. With a little rain and a little fertilizer, Bermuda grass usually produces forage in volume, from June through September. The Yons try to stockpile some Bermuda grass pasture for fall use. The soil type on some of their leased acreage contains more clay and supports tall fescue, which provides additional fall grazing.

According to Kevin, some Bermuda grass is cut for hay, which is sold to horse owners. “Horse hay” can be a lucrative cash crop, and that fits with the Yons’ aversion to feeding hay to cattle. They see it as a last resort, preferring to let cows harvest their own feed.

To extend the “grazing season” the Yons use no-till methods to plant forage crops. For late-fall and winter use, winter annuals are fall-seeded into former row-crop fields. A typical forage mixture includes rye, ryegrass and a legume such as crimson clover. Winter annuals are also no-till planted into selected dormant Bermuda grass pastures. Additionally, center-pivot-irrigated acres are double-cropped, producing winter annuals for winter forage and millet (a summer annual) for summer grazing.

“We’ve grazed a limited amount of alfalfa,



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►Kevin Yon checks cattle grazing pearl millet, a summer annual forage crop. To make the most of limited irrigated acres, both winter and summer annuals are grown for grazing. A modest amount of corn (in background) is grown for silage fed to developing bulls.

too, and we want to do more of it,” Kevin says. “I think we need to use legumes more. They make high-quality forage and could help reduce the amount of nitrogen fertilizer we’ll have to use.”

Such intensive production demands fertilization, with soil tests dictating nutrient needs. In this region, poultry litter is an economical fertilizer choice. Due to the odor and the operation’s close proximity to town, however, Kevin considers it wise to consider wind direction before applying litter.

“It’s best to avoid the weekend when neighbors might be planning a backyard cookout,” he grins.

Intensive management

Making the best use of grazing resources also requires intensive management. Various pastures and fields are divided into multiple paddocks with electric fencing to allow for rotational grazing. During periods of drought, additional fields of crop residues may be rented and fenced for

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►Drake and Corbin Yon erect temporary fence needed for intensively managed rotational grazing.

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strip-grazing. When supplemental forage is needed, the Yons rely on baled wheat straw, cornstalks or peanut vines. Recently, the most economical sources of supplemental protein have been dried corn gluten feed (CGF) or dried distillers' grains (DDG). No commercial feeds are used other than a mineral supplement.

Perhaps the greatest challenges

to implementing intensive grazing management are fences and water. With the assistance of the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) personnel, the Yons have developed cross-fencing in pastures and pipelines serving 43 watering sites that complement planned grazing systems. Streams and ponds have

been fenced to limit cattle access and prevent degradation of riparian areas.

To further prevent erosion and help protect water quality, filter fabric and gravel were placed in heavy-use areas, such as around water tanks and along feeding areas. Similar treatments have been applied around barns and in cattle working pens.

Like many farmers and ranchers, Kevin says he and his family are not fond of government intervention and mandates, but they are cautiously receptive to those programs designed to enhance conservation on working lands. In addition to EQIP, they have participated in the Conservation Security Program (CSP) to improve wildlife habitat. Their kids even took part by building and installing bluebird nesting boxes. The Yons also established a permanent conservation easement on their original 100 acres of pasture through the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP).

"We brought the kids into that discussion. Since that acreage would have to remain as grassland permanently, it would affect them more than us. They liked the idea of protecting that land from development," Lydia says.

"And we put the money received for the easement toward the purchase of a little more land that won't be under an easement," Kevin adds.

Still opportunity

The family is interested in doing more to enhance wildlife habitat, but they haven't tried to develop any wildlife- or recreation-related revenue streams. There is potential, though, with the area's populations of deer, turkey and other game species. Yon-operated properties offer some good fishing, too. One pond gave up a bass big enough to match the state record.

"We host an annual dove hunt for customers and neighbors, and we allow some limited fishing to build good will — especially among youngsters," Kevin explains. "We try to expose area youth to agriculture and how farmers play a big role in supporting wildlife and the environment. They need to know that agriculture generates more than the smell of poultry litter and the noise of bawling calves at weaning time. Hopefully, they will gain an appreciation for the benefits and remember that when they're older. It will be better for agriculture if they do, because they are the future decision-makers."



Environmental Stewardship Award Program

In February 2009, Yon Family Farms became the 18th national winner of the Environmental Stewardship Award Program (ESAP), established by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). The Yon Family of Ridge Spring, S.C., received the award in recognition of their commitment to protecting the environment and improving fish and wildlife habitats while operating a profitable cattle operation.

Each year, regional winners are selected from among nominated beef cattle operations. Nominees are scrutinized by a committee composed of representatives from universities, conservation organizations and federal and state agencies. Judging is based on conservation practices, including management of water, wildlife, vegetation, air and soil, business sustainability, and operator leadership.

From all nominees, seven regional winners are chosen — one per each NCBA geographic region. From that narrowed field, the national award winner is selected and named during the annual Cattle Industry Annual Convention and NCBA Trade Show. Award sponsors include Dow AgroSciences LLC, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

A common trait among all regional and national winners is the desire to leave the land better for future generations while inspiring the next generation to become conscientious stewards. It's true at Yon Family Farms, too, where Kevin and Lydia Yon encourage their three children to share in their concern for the environment and the sustainability of their operation. For the Yon family, whole-farm conservation planning is the key to addressing those concerns.

"Whole-farm conservation planning involves looking at the 'big picture' and long-term effects that our practices will have on the farming operation," Kevin explains. "With limited capital, it is important to prioritize conservation needs and take them one step at a time. Anything we do is thoughtfully planned, with the end goal of improving the farm so that it will remain a sustainable and viable operation for years to come."

To see all of the winners, visit the newsroom at www.4cattlemen.com, Angus Productions Inc.'s (API's) meeting coverage site devoted to the Cattle Industry Annual Convention and NCBA Trade Show.

► **Above:** Yon Family Farms of Ridge Spring, S.C., was named the national Environmental Stewardship Award Program (ESAP) winner.

