

Continuous Living Cover Success Stories

Jason Gruenenfelder

Blanchardville, WI



Green Lands
Blue Waters

Continuous Living Cover (CLC) includes agroforestry; perennial grains, forage, and biomass; cover crops; and winter annuals. CLC keeps living cover on the landscape and roots in the ground year-round, providing both economic and environmental benefits. This series highlights farmers using dynamic CLC strategies and the research behind their practices.

Jason Gruenenfelder grew up on a farm and dreamed of having his own. "All I wanted to do is raise kids and cattle," he jokes. He and wife Kris bought their first 40 acres in 2010. They now own 400 acres and rent another 400, all for grazing and hay production to support a milking herd of 150 Jersey cross cows.

Grazing facilitates the life Jason wanted for his family: low-stress, low-input, and safe enough for their five children to be involved. In college, he visited a farm with a New Zealand style grazing set up, and loved it. "It was unreal. The low inputs, low stress, the ease... It's just so simple," he recalls.

Jason used to grow row crops as well, but shifted away for two reasons. It was time consuming and unsafe for children. "I wanted to raise my kids on a farm, so they had the upbringing that I loved, but do it in a safe way. So we tried to eliminate any heavy equipment." In 2019, they turned their whole operation into permanent pasture. The kids, aged 4 to 10, are involved every day.

"Our system's very simple," Jason explains. "We graze as much as we can." Cattle stay on pasture all winter, fed with hay that Jason cuts on the rented land. The cows are moved often, with the help of 4-wheelers and herding dogs. Electric fencing and polywire make it easy - the older kids can move the cows by themselves!



Benefits and Opportunities

"People drive by and think I've lost my mind, but we love it," Jason says. "The headaches, stress... overall, the lifestyle, it's just a lot better." Benefits are clear for the land, too. During heavy rains, they used to watch as soil washed down hills and runoff ponded in a field. "We haven't seen that since we put everything in grass. Now it all soaks in."

And the cows? "Herd health has been unreal. The bit of the drop in the production is about even with what you're not spending on medicine or vets. We used to do regular vet checks...have them out to work on cows...that's kind of non-existent [now]." There's no need for hoof trimming either, since hooves grind down while grazing. One less chore!

Conservation that Pays

As Jason saw, grazing can be economical. Increased forage production and reduced need for inputs can make costs 10 to 25% lower than confinement. It lets farmers achieve lifestyle goals - such as safely involving the next generation - and use resources most effectively, like grazing hilly land not fit for crops. Plus, grazing can be done on separate acreage, rented land, or on a custom basis, making it an easier entry point for beginning farmers. Federal programs can help, too. Jason got EQIP cost share funding for fencing, water lines, and lanes.

If you are interested in grazing, Jason recommends reaching out directly to graziers: "Find someone who's doing something similar to what you want to do. Call them up, go over, spend a day checking their place out. Graziers are about the nicest community of people. They'll take the time."

Practitioner Resources

- [Midwest Perennial Forage Working Group](#): Resources for contract, dairy, cover crop, beginner graziers and more, including fact sheets, handbooks, and case studies
- [Grassland 2.0](#): Tools and tips to make grazing work for you, including videos, guides, and ways to connect with other graziers
- [Pasture Project](#): Regenerative grazing resources
- Practical Farmers of Iowa [Livestock Program](#)
- [Embarras \(IL\) Grazing Partnership](#)
- [Midwest Grazing Exchange](#): Find and connect to Midwest livestock and landowners
- [Heifer Grazing Compass](#): An Excel-based planning tool to help predict cash flow and financial outcomes for raising heifers on pasture
- [Beginning Grazer Handbook](#): Technical assistance, training, planning and production resources, and more
- [Managed Grazing for Dairy Profits](#): Fact sheet with benefits, cost breakdowns, basic instructions, and resources for managed dairy grazing
- [GrassWorks](#): a membership-based grazier organization

This CLC Success Story was developed with Grassland 2.0, a collaborative group of farmers, researchers, and public and private sector leaders working to develop pathways for increased farmer profitability, yield stability, and nutrient and water efficiency, while improving water quality, soil health, biodiversity, and climate resilience through grassland-based agriculture. Learn more at grasslandag.org

Science Supporting the Practices

Some managed grazing strategies may benefit water infiltration and soil carbon. ([DeLonge and Basche 2018](#))

Well-managed grazing provides ecosystem services and economic sustainability through perennial vegetation and reduced inputs, but policy and educational barriers exist. ([Franzluebbers et al. 2012](#))

Well-managed grazing, but not annual grain and dairy forage systems, enhanced persistent soil carbon in Mollisols. ([Rui et al. 2022](#))

Regenerative grazing benefits include ecosystem services, farm resiliency, community and animal health; key factors could speed expansion. ([Spratt et al. 2021](#))



All photos courtesy of Jason Gruenfelder



grassLAND 2.0

Green Lands Blue Waters is a vision for productive, profitable agriculture in the Upper Midwest based on the concept of getting as much value as possible from farmlands by growing crops that keep the soil covered year-round: farming with Continuous Living Cover. Benefits can be measured in yields and farm profits; but also as reduced risk, improved outlook for long-term productivity from the soil, more jobs, more wildlife, cleaner water and resiliency in the face of a changing climate.