Local landowner gets assistance to develop rotational grazing system

November 2013 Snapshots

Tom Scarponcini always knew he wanted to be a farmer – even when he was a boy, growing up in Livingston, New Jersey.

Realizing that dream, Scarponcini farmed on the east coast for years. After attending a cattle sale in Iowa, he drove through southeastern Minnesota. “I was struck by the beauty and possibility here,” he said.

A twist of fate moved Scarponcini to Minnesota, and for the last 20 years, he’s been farming near Rushford.

Today, Scarponcini has 860 acres, with a mixture of row crops and cattle. He has worked with various governments (Fillmore and Winona Soil and Water Conservation Districts [SWCD], Natural Resources Conservation District [NRCS] and the Southeast Technical Services Area Joint Powers Board) on projects to improve his operation and the environment, including installation of a feedlot with controlled runoff and nutrient retention and a water pipeline system.

On a hot summer day in August, Tom Scarponcini looked out at his pasture land, near Rushford, Minn. Scarponcini uses a rotational grazing system to manage his 300 cattle, helping to protect groundwater and providing habitat for birds and animals. Smiling contentedly, Scarponcini said, “This is a way of life – I get to observe nature, grasses, wildlife. It becomes a pastime.”

Recently, Scarponcini worked with the Fillmore Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to carry out installation of a rotational grazing system, which was developed through the NRCS EQIP program.

“I used to do rotational grazing in Maine, and had an idea in mind for a project. Working with the NRCS and the Fillmore SWCD, I was pleased to learn they had resources to help me develop and install the system,” Scarponcini said.

Dean Thomas, Fillmore SWCD Grazing Specialist, provides technical assistance to landowners through a Board of Water and Soil Resources’ (BWSR) Clean Water Fund accelerated implementation grant. He develops prescribed grazing plans and implements grazing practices through EQIP and other programs throughout the Root River, Whitewater and adjacent watersheds. Having worked with Scarponcini in years past, Thomas understood his operation and goals.

Together, they implemented the rotational grazing system designed for Scarponcini’s operation. Four-hundred acres of pasture land was divided into six grazing “cells.” Each cell contains six paddocks and houses six breeding groups. The groups rotate approximately every six to ten days, so each paddock can re-establish vegetation before the cows return.

Thomas said developing grazing systems is important to water quality in southeastern Minnesota because pasture and hay lands have been shown to significantly reduce soil erosion, nutrient and bacteria runoff. “Rotational grazing pretty much covers every basis for clean water and habitat,” Thomas said.

Steve Lawler, BWSR Board Conservationist, said that the improvements Scarponcini has installed on his farm have made significant environmental impacts. “Mr. Scarponcini has taken initiative to tackle issues like grassland management, sediment loss, nutrient and runoff retention,” Lawler said. “Through amazing partnerships with local units of government, Mr. Scarponcini is doing a great job to protect and improve the water quality in the Root River.”