

Telling the District Story: the Northern Indiana Grazing Conference

by Perry Yoder, Grazing Conference Steering Committee, and Martin Franke, [LaGrange Co. SWCD](#)

The [Northern Indiana Grazing Conference](#) (NIGC) had its beginnings in 2000, when the LaGrange County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) got involved along with NRCS, Ohio State, Purdue, Michigan State, and the University of Illinois, in helping to sponsor and carry out the Great Lakes International Grazing Conference.

This event featured speakers and participants from literally all over the world, and was held on a biannually rotating basis in Ohio, Indiana and Michigan. In 2000 and 2001, the event took place at Shipshewana in the Antique Auction Barn. This two-day event had an average attendance of around 500 people, with 20-25 commercial exhibitors participating in the exposition that accompanied the conference.

After the 2001 Great Lakes Conference, a group of local graziers sought out then-NRCS District Conservationist Barry Bortner. They were impressed with the conference and were interested in seeing that a regional event be started, with an emphasis on grazing issues more specific to the American Midwest.

As a result of that first informal meeting, the Northern Indiana Grazing Conference was born. The first conference, held in early March of 2002, was located in the Community Building at the LaGrange County 4-H Fairgrounds. Early sponsors and organizers of the event were concerned that a local event of this nature would have a limited appeal, and were frankly worried that the conference would flop from a lack of participants. Quite the opposite occurred, as the first conference saw a registered attendance of over 200, which strained the facilities at the 4-H grounds to their very limits. Around a dozen commercial exhibitors also exceeded expectations.

For the 2003 event, larger facilities were sought. Taking a page from the Great Lakes Conference, the Grazing Conference Committee contacted Kevin Lambright at the Shipshewana Auction. Use of the Antique Auction Barn was arranged, which has been the location for the event ever since. From 2003 to the present, the NIGC has ranged in size from attendances of 350 to 600 people, and has been held on the first Friday in February every year. The commercial exposition has grown to include 50



exhibitors annually, and the size of the event is once again pushing the upper limits of its facilities.

The NIGC is organized by a local steering committee of around 20 persons, most of whom are local graziers. Representatives of some sponsoring organizations include the LaGrange County SWCD, Purdue Cooperative Extension, and NRCS on this large committee. A smaller local planning committee of five members and advisors help streamline the decision making process. The large steering committee meets twice a year; the planning committee usually meets four times additionally. The finances of the operation are kept organized by Dona Hunter of the LaGrange County SWCD.

A majority of the graziers involved in the conference are dairy producers, and amongst the dairymen, a good number operate certified organic farms. Dairy and organic interests are well represented topics at conference sessions. Other grazing interests, however, are also represented, including beef, goat, sheep and even pastured poultry. Breakout sessions dealing with some of these topics have always been extremely well attended and received by conference participants.

The success of the Northern Indiana Grazing Conference is a testimony to the dedication that many farm producers in the Midwest have developed toward management intensive rotational grazing. For many small family farms, both “Amish” and “English” alike, rotational grazing has become an avenue through which farming has once again become a viable means of financial support. For others, the attractiveness of this method of farming lies in the environmental advantages gained through rotational grazing such as soil erosion control, improved air quality, and reduced equipment and fuel usage. For those of us involved in the Northern Indiana

Grazing Conference, it is our hope that this conference is and continues to be an important resource that helps perpetuate life on the American Family Farm.



This year's Northern Indiana Grazing Conference is scheduled for Friday, February 6, 2009. This year's theme is **Grazing Management — Important to Small Family Farms**. Featured speakers will be Dan and Ruth Vosberg and Joel McNair, Wisconsin; Jim Gardener, New York; Tim Clark and Samuel Fisher, Indiana; and David Kline, Ohio. Besides these speakers, the program will include a local farmer panel discussion, two breakout sessions (concerning low/no grain dairy cows and pastured poultry), and a youth

panel discussion scheduled for the evening session.

Article by Perry Yoder (Grazing Conference Steering Committee) and Martin Franke (LaGrange Co. SWCD); background information provided by Dennis Wolhete (LaGrange Co. SWCD); Dona Hunter (LaGrange Co. SWCD); David Hague (LaGrange Co. District Conservationist, NRCS). For additional information on this conference contact the LaGrange County SWCD, 910 South Detroit Street, LaGrange, IN 46761, 260-463-3471, info@lagrangeswcd.org.