

Balancing Act

One operation balances caring for the environment and the cattle.

by Sara Gugelmeyer



Larry and Dot Chaikcic speak passionately about the renovations made to their operation, which earned them the Pennsylvania Cattlemen's Association Environmental Stewardship Award.

PHOTOS BY ANGIE STUMP DENTON

Finding a balance between efficient cattle production while still maintaining the environment is not easy. But Larry and Dot Chaikcic of L&D Polled Herefords, Vanderbilt, Pa., have made that balance work for them.

Their small Hereford cow-calf operation is producing quality calves alongside an excellent wildlife habitat of streams and ponds maintained through conservation practices. The Chaikcics started their conservation project in 2001.

They applied for a Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) program through their county's conservation district because of the streams on their 61-acre farm that flow into a nearby fishing lake. Larry says they thought the department of environmental protection would eventually make them fence their cattle out of the stream, so they decided to do the project right from the start.

After application they were judged with a point system based on how urgent the construction was needed. Larry says, "Basically we went to the top of the list since we have a major stream where the cattle are pastured flowing into the lake."

The Fayette County Conservation District's Agriculture Coordinator, Chris Rerko, says the Chaikcics' farm is located at the headwaters of a lake, so it "is very imperative that we keep the cattle out of the stream so they don't degrade the stream and basically keep clean water clean."

Ponds and stream

Through a cost-sharing program with NRCS, the Chaikcics were able to make vast improvements to their operation. They worked

closely with their county's conservation program, and specifically with Rerko and the California University of Pennsylvania Partners for Wildlife, to put up stream-bank fencing along the waterways to keep cattle out of the water. They put in one stream-ramp crossing so the cattle can get to the other side of the stream and two stream-bank ramps that allow the cattle to drink from the stream without disturbing the flow of the water. Rerko says, "This allows the cattle to drink out of stabilized areas without hurting the rest of the stream." They also fenced out the pond and marshy area, which provides excellent habitat for wildlife, including many species of birds.

The stream-bank fencing is also helping the Chaikcics' cattle operation. Before the Chaikcics installed the fence, the cattle would calve near the water. Larry says, "We lost a few calves in the creek because the cows would calve there, and the calves wouldn't get up to nurse and would drown. Since we put up the fence, we haven't lost one."

Grass

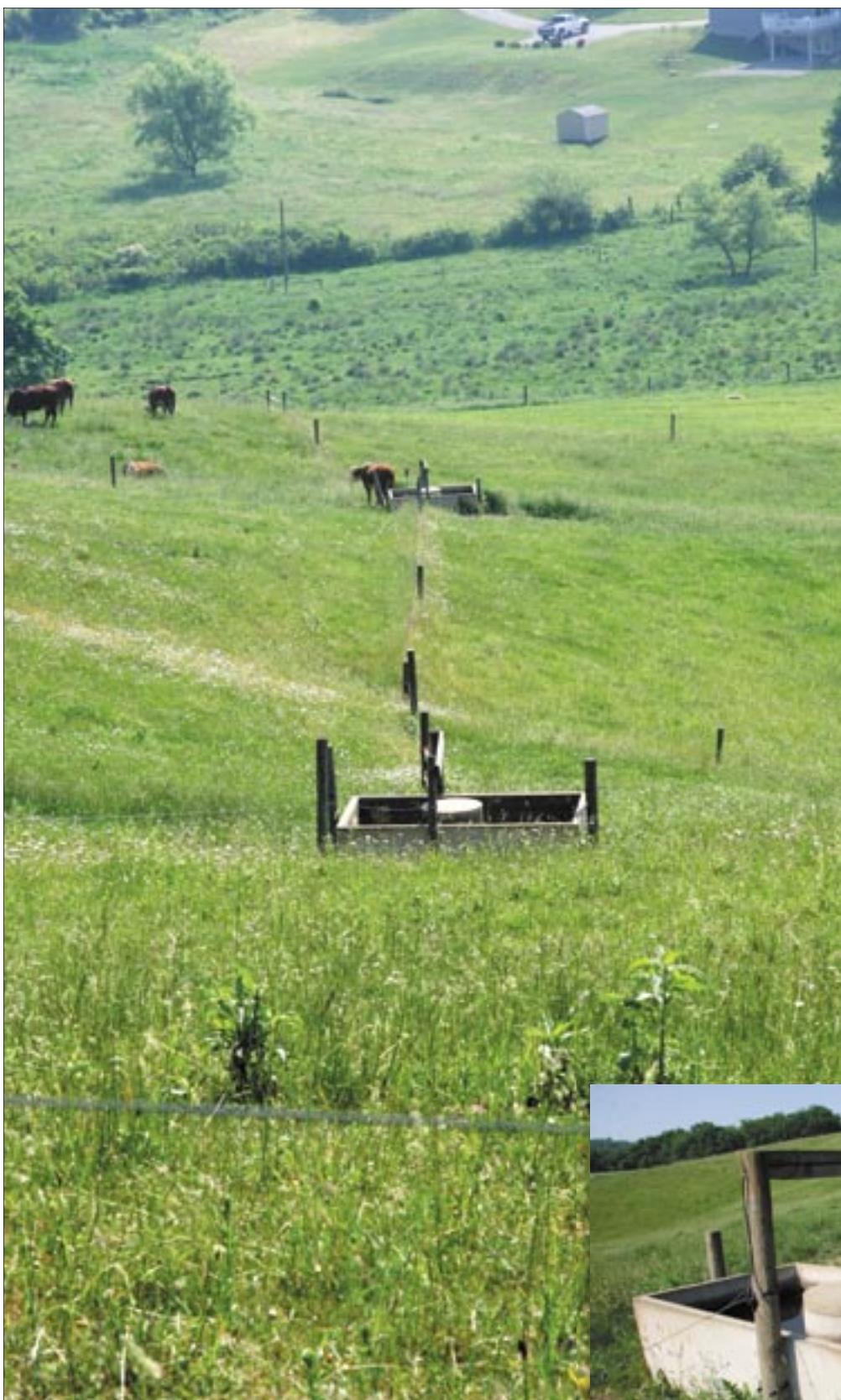
Another improvement the Chaikcics have made to their farm is to build 10 paddocks for rotational grazing. Each paddock is about two acres, and the cattle are rotated every day so they only spend one night in each pasture, Larry says. "This improves grass quality and cattle condition," he says.

Dot compares the rotation to mowing a lawn, "If you mow it, it grows back faster," she says. So when the cattle graze in each paddock for a short time, they basically only have time to eat the tops of the grass.

Larry says, "In the early spring, it's more work because we have to move them, but we can have more cows because we are better utilizing the grass."

Rerko adds, "If they weren't using the rotational system, they would probably have to feed hay right now." He also says that the rotation allows the pastures to rest adequately.

Adding to the effort to help manage the grass, Larry uses a Brush Hog™ mower to clip off the mature grass. He also uses a pasture rake to spread the manure after the cattle graze all the paddocks. He regularly



Chaikcics split their pasture into 10 rotational grazing paddocks (above), and installed a gravity-fed watering system from a natural spring. The water fills concrete water troughs (right), which water four paddocks each. The overflow from the system goes right back to the stream.



applies lime and fertilizer after soil tests to ensure the best forage quality possible.

Because the pastures are steep, the grass had to be reseeded several times to produce a good stand. Larry says he uses a frost-seeding procedure with mostly cool season grasses and white clover. The Chaikcics worked with Rerko and the conservation office to utilize no-till seeding for different types of grass to extend the grazing season. "It saves on the hay usage when things get tight," Rerko says.

Spring-fed watering system

Because of the small paddocks and the stream-bank fencing, the Chaikcics had to find another way to water their cattle. They installed a gravity-fed watering system from a natural spring. The water is piped to several concrete water tanks. The troughs are split to water four pastures each. An overflow pipe also leads to their barn and fills a water tank there. Then, Larry explains, "The overflow is piped back into the stream, so no water is wasted."

Crops

Larry and Dot's conservation doesn't end with their cattle. They also farm about 45 acres of which approximately 20 are fenced so the cattle can utilize the crop residues. Larry uses a strip-farming method because the land is on a hillside. He plants one strip of corn, then one of hay, then one of corn and so on — a system he says helps to prevent erosion.

Cattle

Although the Chaikcics practice conservation, their main focus is producing cattle. They have 47 head, all of which are registered. All are Herefords except five Angus cows they breed to Hereford bulls to produce



Pictured here is part of the stream-bank fencing Chaikcics installed along the waterways to keep the cattle from destroying the stream. This area is fenced so the cattle can cross the water and there are two watering ramps that allow the cattle to drink.

black baldies. The Chaikcics are certified members of the Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program, which means Larry and Dot keep detailed records on all the medications and feed they give the cattle and they organize their records according to the cattle's BQA ear tag numbers. L&D Polled Herefords has been a certified and accredited herd since 1981.

The Chaikcics market their black baldie calves through a preconditioned BQA-approved feeder calf pool. They keep some registered Hereford heifers for replacement females, and others are sold by private treaty or at consignment sales. The bull calves are sold mostly to commercial producers. Larry says he has had very good luck marketing his bull calves. "This year I already have bulls spoken for next year," Larry says. "It is a great opportunity to have repeat customers that like what they got."

Larry helps to market his cattle by showing on the local level. He usually keeps a few



heifers in the barn in preparation for the showing.

Larry has been a Pennsylvania Hereford Association (PHA) director for many years and was recently elected president. He says his goal is to increase membership in the association. He says the main way to improve is to help producers find a reason to be involved. "We need to find ways to benefit their programs, and not just purebred breeders. We want

to promote bulls or cows to other breeds as well," Larry says.

He also says he would like to continue improving his environmentally friendly operation and would one day like to turn it over to his sons. In the meantime, he wants to continue showing on a local level and continue to improve his genetics. He says, "You've got to keep improving or someone else will supply your customers with what they want."

That is plenty to keep Larry and Dot, two retirees, busy for years to come. They are involved in many organizations including PHA. They are also members of the Fayette County grazing group, which promotes rotational grazing with educational speakers and field days. Rerko says Larry and Dot have been instrumental in helping him with that organization.

The couple won the Pennsylvania Cattlemen's Association 2007 Environmental Stewardship Award for their dedication to the environment. Rerko says he has known Larry and Dot since he was young and feels they are very deserving of the award. "I am really glad they got the award because they have put a lot of work into that farm."

The two are modest about their hard work, though. Larry says, "We are conservation minded, but our goal was to get the best pasture for our cows." **HW**



L&D Polled Herefords produces mostly registered Hereford cattle, but the Chaikcics also breed a few registered Angus cows to Hereford bulls to produce top-quality black baldies.

