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New Job, Same Principles

by Julie A. Best
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Mark Clark, from Lawrence County, has led a pretty exciting life. For about 30 years, he worked in corporate industry, and, as a matter of fact, in upper management in corporate industry. With those responsibilities came lots of travel to foreign countries to assist with plant start-ups and renovations.

A few years ago, Clark got caught up in corporate downsizing and suddenly that job was no more. What do you do when your job security has been pulled out from under you? If you are a survivor like Clark, you look for other opportunities. According to Clark, "I went from riding in a private jet to riding in a beat-up farm pick-up."

Clark inherited a 145-acre cattle farm and he decided to turn his attention to making that farm productive. "I don't want to try to promote something that we're not, but I do want to do the right things from all aspects of the business," says Clark. "I want to do the best I can with what I've been blessed with." With that philosophy in mind, Clark started his venture of farming.



Clark seeks advice from NRCS personnel Jamie Carpenter, NRCS Soil Conservationist, and Don Beauchamp,



Just beyond this fence is a creek. To improve water quality, the cattle have been fenced out of the creek. The riparian buffer will be managed for wildlife habitat.

The farm that Clark inherited had few amenities. The barn was run down, the water system was less than efficient, the cross fencing was in much need of repair, and a lot of the perimeter fence didn't exist. Clark says, "The creek was the barrier, and we had cattle getting into the creek." Clark decided there had to be a better way of managing the farm.

"My dad purchased this farm when I was about 12 years old. But, I had been away from farm life for many years. When I inherited the farm, I was not in tune with updated technologies to know how to do this job," says Clark. Not knowing what to do

Moulton Field Office Watershed Project Coordinator. They review his whole farm conservation plan to determine what conservation practices to install next.

does not appear to be a significant hindrance to Clark, however, because he has surrounded himself with professionals who can provide direction.

Clark started his farming venture with an existing

existing herd of primarily commercial cattle. He began to think about ways to improve the herd through some genetics work. He purchased a few registered Black Angus cattle. With the assistance of Dr. Darrel Gray, he is improving the herd through embryo transplants.



To improve the herd, Clark purchased a few registered Black Angus cattle.

Dr. Gray says, “We have implemented an entirely different reproductive procedure from what Mark had to start with.” The improved genetics system calls for artificial insemination. They have identified some of the top genetic cattle in the herd. They are taking those genetically superior Angus cattle, and through a program of using some hormones, making those cattle produce multiple embryos at one time. Gray says, “We flush those embryos and use the commercial, non-registered cattle to host the embryos. So, we have commercial cattle having pure bred Angus calves from these superior donor cows.”

In addition to helping Clark improve the genetics of the herd, Gray is also assisting Clark in other ways. “We’ve implemented a herd health program,” says Gray. That involves vaccinating, de-worming the cattle twice a year, and taking care of the calves. “Mark has implemented a nutrition program as well. He has been using commodity feeds to supplement these cows, and it has worked pretty well,” says Gray.

Clark sought the assistance of the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to improve the pasture and the water quality for the cattle. The first step in addressing the conservation issues was getting a whole-farm conservation plan laid out and then implementing practices to ensure that all the conservation issues were addressed. The plan calls for a rotational grazing system, which includes cross fencing, pasture planting, and water troughs.

The first conservation issue to be addressed was water quality. The farm is bordered on three sides by creeks—Shoal, Flint, and Flat. To improve water quality, the cattle needed to be fenced out of the streams. To assist with that effort, NRCS suggested that Clark enroll in the Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CCRP). CCRP provides technical and financial assistance to eligible farmers to address soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on their lands. It encourages farmers to convert highly erodible cropland or other environmentally sensitive acreage to vegetative cover, such as tame or native grasses, wildlife plantings, trees, filterstrips, or riparian buffers. About 9.1 acres qualified for CCRP. While only 9.1 acres qualified for CCRP financial assistance, Clark actually has taken

approximately 40 acres out of pasture production. “The marginal pasture will be planted in habitat for quail and other wildlife. It makes an ideal location for wildlife, and, with a little luck, it will increase the nearly non-existent deer population,” says Clark.

Clark applied for assistance from the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to help with other conservation issues. EQIP is a voluntary conservation program that offers financial and technical assistance with installation of management practices on eligible agricultural land. Approximately 11,200 feet of fence have been installed around the farm. The cattle have been fenced out of all three creeks. Jamie Carpenter, Soil Conservationist with NRCS says, “We are looking at three major creeks—Flint, Flat, and Shoals. Portions of each creek are on the Alabama Department of Environmental Management 303d list of impaired streams. Mark has improved water quality down stream tremendously by fencing the cattle out of the creeks.”

Up until this point, the creeks had been the source of water for the cattle. Now that the creeks have been fenced out, another source of water was needed. A pond that is centrally located was installed as a temporary water source. Once the cross fencing and water troughs have been installed, an existing well will be used as a source of water. A spring development will be used as another source of water for a trough in one pasture.

A second area that needed immediate attention was the heavy use area. Financial assistance from EQIP was used to install a heavy use area adjacent to the barn. “There can be problems with disease when you feed round bales out in the field,” says Clark. “The cattle can erode and defecate the area around the hay bales. I will be feeding in and around the barn on heavy use areas to make sure that the cattle have a mud-free, clean feeding area to limit the spread of disease.”

Trapping areas where cattle can be corralled for treatments of various types join the heavy use area. Clark has installed a hydraulic trapping pen that provides a safe environment for treating the cattle.

Clark says, “There are a lot of things about the new and improved ways of managing the cattle farm that I wasn’t exposed to growing up. My father was in the cattle business for many years, and, in conversation with other cattle farmers, he would say, ‘I’m running so many head.’ I’m changing my philosophy from that. I’m not running so many head now; rather, I’m trying to manage the cattle that we have, through a proper nutrition program, with improved genetics, and diverse marketing strategies.”

Clark is new to the farming business. However, he is applying the principles of management that he is familiar with to the farming industry. Clark says, “I’m learning through involvement with many local, state, and national beef associations. I seek the advice of my veterinarian and I glean information from conservation professionals.”

So, how has life changed for Mark Clark? Clark says, “In 2002, I traveled over 186,000 miles; last year it was significantly less. My longest trip was to Five Points [just a few miles up the road] to drink coffee! But, my quality of life has significantly improved. It has been a

pleasure to associate with the caliber and quality of people that I have met in this business.”

Clark says, “I plan to expand my asset base each year and grow the highest quality cattle I can.” As a new farmer, Clark is attempting to get the biggest return on the number of cattle that he manages to command the premium price.

In the farming business, the old adage, “It’s not what you know but who you know” seems to apply. Clark acknowledges that he doesn’t know all the answers. He is eager, however, to seek advice from professionals who can provide guidance.

“I’ve been in the farming business now about 13 months. I’m going to give it five years. At the end of five years, I’m going to look at the return on my investment and make an evaluation,” Clark says. “I love what I do, but I’m not going to continue to do it if it’s not financially successful. Will it work?—I think so.”

For assistance with conservation issues, contact your local USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service office.

Editor’s Note: *Darrell Thompson, manager of Lawrence County Exchange, Moulton, says he hopes Clark has gotten some of that professional advice from the Co-op. “We’ve been an input supplier to Mark since he got started and I’d like to think, along with the products he picks up here, he’s taken advantage of some of the expertise we have to offer. We’ve certainly worked to be a helpful partner with him in the projects he has going with the assistance of the NRCS as well as his day to day operations on the farm.”*
