



## The Living Land Remembers, Treat it with Care Beginning Farmer Revives Legendary Land

Above: Farmer Reed Fitton and some of his grazing heifers.

By Tivoli Gough, NRCS–Wisconsin Public Affairs Specialist

Reed Fitton, of Gays Mills, Wisconsin, is a beginning farmer who has the opportunity to rent and farm a legendary piece of property known as the Ben Logan Farm. Reed strives to work the land by adhering to Logan's principles in the 1975 book, *The Land Remembers*. "Once you have lived on the land, been a partner with its moods, secrets and seasons, you cannot leave. The living land remembers," from *The Land Remembers*. Reed didn't grow up as a farmer, but became interested, after working on a few vegetable farms and a goat dairy. He had dreams to set up his own grazing and dairy operation one day. He gained experience by participating in the Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy Farmers and is currently in his second year as a Dairy Grazing Apprentice. He's working with veteran grazer Don Boland, a close neighbor, to graze his own herd and some of Boland's heifers. During the 2014 season, Reed raised and custom grazed 30 young dairy heifers of his own and 60 of his mentor's. These animals were rotationally grazed and moved to a new paddock every day by Reed. "As a beginning farmer, having the opportunity to work with a veteran on his farming operation is great," said Fitton. Reed assists with milking 170 dairy cattle on Boland's property.

Fitton rents 105 acres, 55 tillable and 50 woodland. The owners have protected the southwest Wisconsin farm by granting conservation easement to the Mississippi Valley Conservancy, to ensure the tillable land will remain as farmland forever. Because of that, new buildings are limited, contour strips must stay on tillable acres, waterways must stay, and the wooded

area must be fenced and free of livestock. The owners specifically wanted a renter to graze the land, so Reed jumped on the opportunity. That's where the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) offered its assistance. To abide by these special rules, Reed contacted the NRCS because he had heard about its technical assistance services and successful cost-share programs. Fitton applied and was accepted to utilize the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to implement conservation practices to help the land. Conservation practices Reed implemented include fencing, forage and biomass planting, livestock pipeline, watering facilities, prescribed grazing and conservation cover. "We're encouraging beginning farmers to partner with us to learn about the best conservation practices available to help their land and to encourage them by offering technical and financial assistance to aid in their success," said Jimmy Bramblett, State Conservationist in Wisconsin.

When Reed arrived, 40 acres were in hay and 15 acres were previously in corn. The land had been farmed conventionally. The land and waterways needed some work to be revived. Through conservation efforts and assistance from NRCS, Fitton seeded six kinds of forages into 15 acres of corn stubble to create paddocks. On the existing tillable acres not previously in corn, he interseeded a forage mix using no-till, to help thicken and strengthen the pastureland. The mix included meadow fescue, orchard grass, perennial ryegrass, ladino clover, alsike clover, and alfalfa. Reed specifically included clover species in his seed mix to aid honeybees as part of the NRCS Honey Bee Pollinator Effort through EQIP.

# Helping People Help the Land



Reed Fitton's heifers grazing the land.

From June to September the region is the resting ground for over 65 percent of the commercially managed honey bees in the country. It is a critical time when bees require abundant and diverse forage across broad landscapes to build up hive strength for the winter. Fitton received funding through EQIP and seeded in FY14, the first year the special initiative was available. To protect the clover blossoms and aid in pollinator habitat, the livestock are not allowed to graze the plants below four inches. "Leaving the plants growing higher than the minimum required really seemed to help in reference to the number of pollinators I see around. Winter is always rough on bees, but I've seen more pollinators this year than I ever have before due to my conservation efforts," said Reed. Also, during the first year of seed establishment, he halted from haying the acres until after August 1. "I let eight of the hayed acres go to seed so it can reseed itself. I've found letting the pasture go a little longer has been helpful for the pollinators and minimizes bloat in my herd because the lush clover has time to ripen up," said Reed.

To attract pollinators, an area must have adequate sources of food, shelter, and nesting sites. A variety of wildflowers and grasses will provide pollinators with food (nectar, pollen, and/or larval host plants).

Fitton and his partner, Amanda Rubasch, are beekeepers themselves. They have six active hives and have seen great success with Reed's prairie pollinator efforts. Not only has he increased value of the feed for his grazing cattle by including clovers, he has also seen an increase in bee activity at his hives, and an increase in honey production, which he says is sweet! "Through technical and financial assistance provided by the NRCS Honey Bee Pollinator Effort, I am seeing more bee and butterfly activity this summer than I ever have. The six bee hives on our land look healthy, I've got more bees and

pollinators around, and honey production is up! There's bee's all over the place now, which is rewarding to see."

"Karyl Fritsche, the District Conservationist in Crawford County, walked me through the whole application process, helped me set up a conservation plan, recommended seed mixes, assisted with questions, planting, and more. She's been great to work with and NRCS has always been available if I have a question or stop into my local service center office," explains Fitton. EQIP assistance through the Honey Bee Pollinator Effort provided to landowners, like Fitton, provide guidance and support to farmers and ranchers to implement conservation practices that provide safe and diverse food sources for honey bees. "Reed has been great to work with through this whole process. He has been very proactive both in communicating his long term goals, while taking into consideration the effects on ecosystem around him, which made integrating the prescribed grazing an easy fit into the pollinator program," said Karyl Fritsche, District Conservationist, Prairie du Chien Service Center.

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Appropriate cover crops or pasture management may provide quality forage and habitat for honey bees and other pollinators, as well as reduce erosion, increase soil health, and inhibit invasive species. Setting a conservation plan for Fitton helped him realize his goals and passion for farming. "Always tilling the land and letting it wash out, and then the soil is gone; you don't have to look hard to see that. There's only so much soil there. We need to give back and not keep taking, taking, and taking. I'm doing my best to restore soil health in this area through conservation practices with NRCS."

Reed plans to continue his farming success as a grazer and owner of dairy heifers, while also implementing conservation practices that help the land, and pollinator habitat. "Starting as a young, beginning farmer with a dream of having my own operation, to being a successful grazer and farmer, with a herd of 60 dairy heifers of my own, I'd say I've reached my dream," explains Reed. "I wouldn't be where I am today without the technical and financial assistance of NRCS to help me reach my goals."