



South Dakota

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Conservation Works for Organic Operation

Dominic and Trista Harmon, who ranch in south central South Dakota, can easily see how their rangeland management practices are restoring grassland health through an increase in forage production.



Dominic and Trista Harmon with their sons Phoenix and Forest.

Recovery of the resources is a result of the advancements the Harmons have made.

As a family-based operation, the Harmons manage the ranch and White Thunder Organics (WTO) business together.

Dominic and Trista were honored with the 2007 Society for Range Management (SRM) South Dakota Section Excellence in Range Management Award for their stewardship and innovative ideas.

Along with receiving the SRM Award, Calvin Waln, Executive Director, and Fern Bordeaux-Boltz, Board President of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe's Tribal Land Enterprise presented them a star quilt in honor of their accomplishments. Calvin expressed appreciation for the progress the Harmons have made and Dominic's accomplishments as a young tribal member. He said it's honorable to have a young tribal family move back into the community and apply good practices for the land and their livelihood.

WTO is a diverse operation with a unique holistic approach which has been quite successful for the Harmons. Their goals include grazing management in sync with nature, rotational grazing for weed control and pasture growth, monitoring plant growth and productivity, using a diverse plant community to optimize production, and raising organic grass-fed beef.

Dominic and Trista have a passion for natural and holistic management of their operation; and they are sharing their knowledge with others through presentations such as the SRM tour. Their success with organic grass-fed beef

is a popular topic as well as genetics, herd health, and pasture systems involving organic and grass-fed beef.

Their cattle are backgrounded on the ranch and direct marketed to an organic finisher. Management and improvement techniques are organic based, including how they finish organic grass-fed beef, treat sick livestock with herbal medications, and using bird and bat houses help control livestock pests.

Since they are an organic producer, their livestock health precautions focus on alternative medicine and they do not use antibiotics. Although some vaccines can be used in organic operations, the Harmons choose preventive measures to keep the livestock's immune systems strong.

Their rotational grazing system is designed to try to keep ahead of fly development. They also use an organic fly repellent made up of mineral oil, garlic, and essential oils.

Dominic recognizes that the animals graze native plants and naturally select forbs and native herbs if they need to self-medicate. Mineral supplements include rock salt and an organic mineral mix.



The Harmons have seeded back most of the cropland and established alfalfa in order to build back soil quality and compete against weeds. Another acreage was seeded to a native grass mix; and another is for raising forage crops, which are grazed in paddocks after the growing season.

NRCS technical specialists and private range consultants helped the Harmons understand how plants grow and forage production on various ecological sites. Grazing techniques have been refined to be the most beneficial in changing plant communities based on timing, length of grazing time and intensity. Rangeland monitoring with photography and global positioning systems (GPS) were key management tools to document trends. Changes in the landscape can be slow. When they first monitored the plant communities, they found 8-10 species on the markers. With their new grazing system, they are finding 30-40 species.

Dominic and Trista brought new ideas and energy to the land they are managing. With the help of NRCS technical assistance and other programs, the Harmons are reaching their conservation goals as well as demonstrating their passion for sustainable agriculture through their ranch. Their conservation efforts, like many other South Dakota landowners', are leading to more productive lands and a healthier environment for all Americans.

For flea control, they use a cattle scratcher and diatomaceous earth during the spring and fall. Some innovative practices include interseeding patches of garlic with 10 garlic cloves per patch which is intended for livestock to graze.

Working closely with NRCS staff and other specialists, the Harmons are implementing many conservation practices to improve the health of their resources. When Dominic and Trista took over the ranch in 2004, they first did an inventory. Then they worked with NRCS to design a grazing system that would meet their goals and objectives and improve the diversity in the plant communities for long-term rangeland health.

Their grazing techniques have increased native species and large Canada thistle patches have been reduced by 80 percent. The ranch has the White River flowing along its northerly border. WTO installed new watering facilities and either fenced off, limited, or excluded livestock use along the river, allowing woody vegetation to regenerate and stabilize areas that were eroding. Working with the conservation district and NRCS for rejuvenating the riparian area, the Harmons planted over 800 hand plants (sandbar willow, false indigo, and redosier dogwood) along the riparian edge in the most eroded areas.

NRCS' tribal liaison helped the Harmons participate in USDA conservation programs which are open to eligible landowners/operators to help accomplish their goals. Harmons used the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to help set up water developments and cross fences to aid grazing distribution.



Both bird and bat houses have been placed near stockwater tanks, corrals, and the headquarters to attract birds and bats that utilize insects for food, such as flies, mosquitoes, and other pests that stress livestock.



During the SRM tour stop at new EQIP water tank, Dominic and NRCS District Conservationist Leiland Schoon addressed the variety in ecological sites on the ranch. The landscape presented challenges and opportunities in developing a livestock distribution plan in their conservation plan.