



July 26, 2024

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Stan Wise, Communications Coordinator

PHONE: 605-368-4091

EMAIL: stan.soilhealth@sdconservation.net

Regenerative ag: Making room for the next generation

By Stan Wise

South Dakota Soil Health Coalition

PIERRE, SD – There are many reasons for producers and landowners to adopt regenerative land management practices, but few are as important as the prospect of bringing a new generation into a farming or ranching operation.

When Barry Little’s son, Eli, returned to the family farm after graduating from South Dakota State University in 2013, he knew something had to change.

“There was enough income for my family, but when he wanted to support his own family, that's why we were going to get more involved in the livestock side of things. We saw livestock, especially beef cattle, as an opportunity for there to be more revenue and room for Eli,” Little said.

With the addition of cattle, the Littles needed more forage.

“We started planting cover crops to graze later in the year – not so much for the soil health benefit as because we needed more feed to get through that period of the year,” Little said.

They also started adding small grains like oats and wheat to their corn and soybean crop rotation. Though they didn’t adopt these new practices initially to build soil health, the Littles were improving their land by diversifying their crop rotation, keeping living roots in the soil for longer portions of the year, and incorporating livestock on their crop ground. Those soil health improvements began to pay dividends.

“We turned into a least-cost producer. And in the last five years, we've really cut back on the fertilizer that we put on our crops,” Little said. “We also don't use fungicides and insecticides anymore. So, we don't have those costs.”

Regenerative agriculture practices allowed Little to improve his profitability and bring his son into the operation. Today, the two of them operate their Blioux River Ranch near Castlewood, SD. “When you cut costs and keep the yields the same, there's more to go around,” Little said.

Training the next generation

Jessica Michalski raises cattle and crops in eastern Clark County, South Dakota, with her husband, Darin, and their son Cutler. From the very beginning of their farming careers, the Michalskis began converting some of their crop ground back into grasslands. Jessica began working for the Natural Resources Conservation Service 21 years ago, and after some conversations with Darin, they decided to begin farming with no-till practices 15 years ago.

Since then, they have noticed a big improvement in their fields. “We've seen how great they do in periods where it's drier, and the fields that maybe have had more tillage are drying up more. And we've got fields that still have adequate moisture because we're retaining that moisture right there on that particular field,” Michalski said.

Today, Michalski is the Natural Resources Conservation Service South Dakota state resource conservationist, and her family's operation showcases many conservation land management practices. They are increasing the diversity in their grasslands, working to promote native species. They also have a diverse crop rotation including alfalfa, corn, soybeans, oats, millet, grass mix, and some other cover crops.

“We don't just want it to be sustainable. We really want it to be regenerative because we've seen so much soil loss throughout the state with recent wind and rain events,” Michalski said. “We've just really had to make a decision that this is the way we wanted to operate.”

Michalski said her children have learned the importance of their regenerative practices through their daily interactions.

“They're out there with us checking cows, seeing our grass, wildlife, pollinators, and seasonal wetlands with the ducks and baby deer. And they see how healthy the land is. I think kids are more apt and aware sometimes than we give them credit for,” she said. “We've always just had those open discussions at the supper table. We just we had those open discussions with all three of our children, and I think that makes a big difference.”

Cutler, who informed his parents in his junior year of high school that he would like to return to the operation, understands why his family places a priority on being good stewards of the land, Michalski said.

“Cutler understands the stress in springs like this where you do have a lot of prevented planting acres, and you're still not going to go out there, and you're not going to till that soil. You've made that decision. You're not going to do it,” she said. “And it does play into what kind of condition you're leaving that land in for your future generations.”

Making room for new ideas

As producers plan for the future of their operations, not only do they need to grow healthy soil, but they also need to grow healthy successors, according to SDSU Extension Livestock Business Management Field Specialist Heather Gessner.

Gessner teaches a course on planning for successful farm transitions.

She said that as farm kids progress in their education, they are exposed to many new ideas, and for a farm transition to be successful, those kids need to have space on the farm or ranch to explore those ideas.

“When we’re talking about bringing kids back to the farm, a lot of times we want them to come back for your labor,” Gessner said. That kind of thinking doesn’t offer the younger generation much hope for the future or prepare them to take over farm management decisions, she said. When young producers share their ideas and are met with opposition from their parents, they can become discouraged about their agricultural careers.

“When we bring back that next generation, we need to let them have some buy-in and some stock in how decisions are made,” Gessner said.

The best way to do that, she said, is to set up some timelines for the next generation to take over some enterprises on an operation.

“You could set a goal for your kid to take over the cow-calf enterprise by 2025 and the row crop enterprise by 2027,” Gessner said. “You have to ask yourself if you’re ready for a partner or you’re looking for a hired hand.”

Little said that, at first, he had trouble letting his son, Eli, take a role in decision-making on their farm.

“I think that was difficult for me because I made all my own decisions for so many years,” Little said. “But we went to the Soil Health Conference down in Brookings, and he came home from that just full of ideas. Once he started understanding what his thoughts were, it’s lots easier now to let him lead us in that direction now and then. The direction that he’s leading us is where every year we just are more confident that what we’re doing is going to regenerate our soil and leave the land that we operate in better shape than it was when we started.”

To learn more about regenerative agriculture practices, visit www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org or contact the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition at sdsoilhealth@gmail.com or 605-280-4190.



USDA-NRCS South Dakota photo

Barry Little was able to become profitable enough to bring his son, Eli, into his operation near Castlewood, SD, by adopting regenerative agriculture practices.

To download a high-resolution version of this photo, visit <https://bit.ly/3StKjCf>



Courtesy photo

Jessica and Darin Michalski taught their son Cutler the importance of their regenerative agriculture practices, preparing him to become a partner in their operation in Clark County, South Dakota.

To download a high-resolution version of this photo, visit <https://bit.ly/3A00rFd>



Courtesy photo

The Michalskis have seeded cropland back to grassland, and they work to promote diverse native species in their pastures.

To download a high-resolution version of this photo, visit <https://bit.ly/4cUK8lz>



Courtesy photo

Kasey, Shay, and Cutler Michalski have learned about the benefits of regenerative agriculture through conversations with their parents and activities on their family's operation in eastern Clark County, South Dakota.

To download a high-resolution version of this photo, visit <https://bit.ly/3WermV6>