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Noted rancher, author to explain ‘sweet spot’ of grazing at conference

By Janelle Atyeo

For South Dakota Soil Health Coalition

PIERRE, SD – Tom Krawiec found the sweet spot for grazing quite by accident.

The Canadian rancher sought out the point where grass in his pasture was both established enough to stay healthy and nutritious enough to help his cattle to pack on the pounds.

“Really, it’s just a very subtle shift in grazing,” Krawiec said from northern Alberta during a recent Zoom interview.

His horses and lambs gained exceptionally well in early August, he said, when the grass in their pastures had started to harden, becoming higher in protein. The key was to catch it just before the grass reached its reproductive phase.

“I thought, ‘Wow, they’re really packing on the pounds,’” he said.

He now wants to keep his animals grazing grass at that stage year-round. Krawiec rotated his animals through pastures, and calculated the amount of time the grass needed to rest after grazing.

“I started homing in on the sweet spot,” Krawiec said.

His cattle are happy. Heifers consistently gain 2.5 pounds a day. Calves were 50 to 80 pounds heavier at weaning.

Letting his pastures rest and providing a cover of residue allowed his forage production to take off. He went from grazing 40 cow-calf pairs and 70 hogs on 373 acres to running 3,000 yearlings on 5,500 rented acres.

By grazing only 40% of the above-ground biomass, the roots don’t stop growing, he learned. That’s a benefit to soil health. Not only does it keep the ground covered, but roots grow deeper and plants release soil exudates that feed the living organisms in the soil.

“It becomes a much healthier environment,” Krawiec said. “More biology will survive the winter season. Next spring you’re starting at a higher level, and by year three you have this explosion.”

Krawiec will talk about his grazing plan and simplified approach to ranching during the 2025 Soil Health Conference, Jan. 15-16 at the Ramkota Hotel and Event Center in Watertown, South Dakota. The annual event is organized by the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition.

Educational seminars can be life changing, as Krawiec can attest. It was 25 years ago when he attended a week-long holistic management course.

“It really piqued my interest and enlivened my passion about growing grass,” he said.

After finding the sweet spot in his pastures and coming up with a solid grazing plan, Krawiec’s next effort was to make things simple. His book about it, “Ranching Like a 12-Year-Old: Ranching that is Simple, Easy, and Fun” was published in 2022.

His former set-up relied on too much temporary fence, too many separate herds and required too much effort to haul water to the different paddocks.

“We were working our butts off, and it was not fun,” he said.

Hosting a couple of city kids on his ranch for the summer prompted him to consider how to modify tasks or eliminate them if they were too difficult for someone younger than 12 or older than 80 to handle.

“A lot of people just don’t have that mindset,” said Shawn Freeland, a rancher from Caputa in western South Dakota who bought Krawiec’s book after hearing him on a podcast.

Freeland found the simple grazing systems interesting. He’s looking forward to learning more about grazing in the sweet spot and talking to Krawiec at the Soil Health Conference.

Attending the winter conference is what made Freeland want to join the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition Board of Directors, where he’s served since 2018. As more farmers and ranchers adopt regenerative practices, he’s found it expands opportunities to network and learn from others at the conference.

“It’s nice to get around those like-minded people. The networking is huge,” Freeland said.

Registration is open at www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org/soil-health-conference. Admission is \$50, which includes all event materials and meals as well as SDSHC membership. Students can register for free.

For questions or special accommodations, please contact the Coalition at sdsoilhealth@gmail.com or 605-280-4190.



Courtesy photo

Canadian rancher and author Tom Krawiec will discuss his methods for maximizing pasture health and animal production at the 2025 Soil Health Conference, Jan. 15-16 in Watertown, SD.

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Courtesy photo

Canadian rancher Tom Krawiec only lets his livestock graze 40 percent of the above-ground biomass to keep his pasture root systems and soil healthy.

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