From Orchard to Efficient Livestock Production in Northwest Georgia

Jody Christiansen and Holli Kuykendall

Located in Gilmer County in the Northwest Georgia mountains, Rozier Wingate and his wife, Linda, have lived on the farm since 1989. Rozier was farming part-time, then in 1992, began farming full-time. The farm, which was an old apple orchard, was inherited by the Wingates. Since the Wingate family took over the land, they removed 3,000 apple trees, built four pullet houses for laying hens, and established 35 acres for grazing their 50 head cattle herd. They also established a forced air poultry litter composting facility and developed a potted plant business. They have been involved in farming since 1979 and are energetic, innovative and busy people.

Before the Wingate’s involvement in the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Model Farm program, an initiative targeting southeastern cattle producers, the pastures used for continuous stocking were primarily endophyte infected ‘Kentucky 31’ tall fescue with an assortment of weeds. The breeding season for their cows was spread out over several months and the operation lacked a bull confinement area. The NRCS Model Farm program is a spin-off of the Ruminant Livestock Efficiency Program (RLEP). The multifaceted RLEP was developed in response to President Clinton’s Climate Change Action Plan.

NRCS and the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service (UGA-CES) provided advice to the Wingates on how the efficiency of their operation could be improved. The advice provided was based on an economic profile of their operation and was targeted to help put more dollars back into their pockets while protecting the resource base on their farm. “My goal is to raise beef more efficiently,” Rozier said, “not increase the number of head in my operation.”

“Technology improves the product,” said Greg Huber, NRCS Area Water Quality Specialist, “but you need to pick and choose the appropriate technology for your program. That was our goal in assisting the Wingates.” Rozier and Linda started applying the recommended practices in the spring of 1997 and have already seen considerable improvement. The Wingate’s farm has become a showroom for the area to promote practices that will increase production efficiency on cow-calf operations.

Considering recommendations given by Dr. Mark McCann, UGA-CES Beef Cattle Specialist, the Wingates decided it was time to improve the management of their cattle herd. They turned to practices such as a controlled breeding season, cattle identification and record keeping, improved herd genetics and routine pregnancy checking. Huber had recently worked with Rozier and Linda to establish several acres of eastern gamagrass for high quality summer grazing and hay production. Bob Baldwin, NRCS District Conservationist working through the Limestone Valley Soil and Water Conservation District, and Huber advised them to improve their permanent cool-season pastures and manage forage utilization through the use of rotational stocking.

The Wingates are the first to try rotational stocking in Gilmer County. “Continuous grazing is the habit for this area,” said Rozier. “The initial cost to the producer is high [to establish a rotational grazing system]. However, in the long run, the money saved on supplemental feed looks good.” Rozier estimates that they have already saved $2,800 to $3,000 in hay costs this winter. Baldwin remarked, “producers can make money on a consistent basis with superior management.” Nutrient management planning was also emphasized. Poultry litter on the farm is in abundance, so the Wingates use it to fertilize their pastures. “We used to just spread it,” said Rozier. “Now we calibrate our spreader and use nutrient management with soil testing and litter analysis to apply the litter.” Lime has been applied to the pastures to increase soil pH.

Once users of barbed wire fencing to establish pastures for grazing, Rozier uses only high tensile fencing now. Soon the operation will have expanded to 90 acres of rotational stocking from the original 35 acres once used continuously. With fresh grass on the other side of the fence, the Wingate’s cattle are now more docile and easier to work. With the addition of newly purchased squeeze shoots and head catches, improvements in handling are noticeable. According to Rozier, “the cattle
A family run business, “Old Orchard Farm” is operated by (left to right) Rozier, Linda, son Rozier, Jr, and daughter Sabrina (not pictured).

The Wingates operate four pullet houses used to supply commercial layers.

The Wingates operate a forced air, passive composting facility to stabilize the nutrient content of by-product poultry litter available on their farm.

didn’t always react well to borrowed equipment. I am pleased with our new equipment.”

Rozier has interseeded the endophyte infected tall fescue with orchardgrass and ladino clover to dilute the toxic effects of the tall fescue. “There has been a tremendous difference in the cattle visually,” said Rozier, “and the quality of surplus forage harvested as hay has improved to the point where we can sell it to local dairies.” Rozier also interseeded one of his pastures with oats, winter rye, wheat, and some “complimentary” austrian winter pea. The cattle are “tick fat” and lack the shaggy hair coat associated with fescue toxicity. This summer, the Wingates plan to graze their eastern gama grass instead of cutting it for hay. They know this practice will allow increased stockpiling of the cool-season pastures for fall and winter grazing.

To improve the herd genetics and calf weaning weights, the Model Farm Program helped Rozier and Linda purchase an angus bull with known EPDs. “Our previous bull purchase was based on visual observation;” said Rozier. Rozier pre-conditioned the new bull in the newly constructed bull lot and now, according to Rozier, “Calving is right on schedule.” Huber stated, “A controlled breeding season is a low cost practice with great gain.” Ronnie Gheseling, Gilmer County Extension Agent, added, “you can’t work the cattle as a group, such as for vaccinations and marketing, without the uniformity of a controlled breeding season.”

The Wingates have also received planning assistance through the State Soil and Water Conservation Commission Best Management Practices Program. Practice installation under this program is available to producers in targeted watersheds throughout the state. Cost-sharing through the BMP program helped the Wingates establish their fencing and alternative water supplies which protects springheads and water sources on and near their property.

Now, back to nutrient management and the pullet enterprise. The Wingates have an average of 40,000 pullets on the farm at one time. Linda Wingate received a grant through the Limestone Valley Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) Council to demonstrate forced air composting of the litter. They now either bag or sell the compost in bulk to local retail stores and metro-Atlanta landscapers. Linda uses the soil amendment in her potted plant business and in her home garden. The potted plants are sold to local nurseries, and you should see her pantry!

Rozier is a member of the Georgia Cattleman’s Association, the Farm Service Agency County Committee, and is a new Soil and Water Conservation District Supervisor. He has attended the UGA-CES Master Cattleman course and its follow-up refresher course. “If anyone is serious about raising cattle, this course is a must. The refresher is also worth while,” said Rozier. “There are always new and different ways to do things.”

In addition to her nursing activities and home-based enterprises, Linda is now on the Limestone Valley RC&D Council. According to Holli Kuykendall, NRCS Georgia Grassland Water Quality Specialist and manager of the Model Farm Program, “when you need to select producers willing to try new things and readjust their way of thinking, these are the kind of folks you hope to find. My hat is off to Gary Rutledge, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician, for suggesting the Wingates for our Model Farm Program. With their community service and respect from fellow producers in the area, our message will get out.”

A heavily relied upon reference book has its place on Rozier’s bedside table. The book, Southern Forages, by D.M. Ball, C.S. Hoverland, and G.D. Lacefield, is “wholeheartedly” recommended by the Wingates. “Anyone raising cattle or forages in this area will benefit from this book”, said Rozier. As to the success of the new grazing management system, Rozier states, “My cows used to visit my neighbor’s pastures, now my neighbor’s cows visit my pastures.”

Many visitors have stopped by to see the Wingate’s rotational grazing system in progress. Several people want to return in the summer to see what it looks like in warm weather. An NRCS grazing lands training session has already been held on the farm. The site will next be used for a grazing field day so that interested producers can learn more about the practices in use on “Old Orchard Farm”.

Jody Christansen is a public affairs specialist and Holli Kuykendall is grassland water quality specialist.