

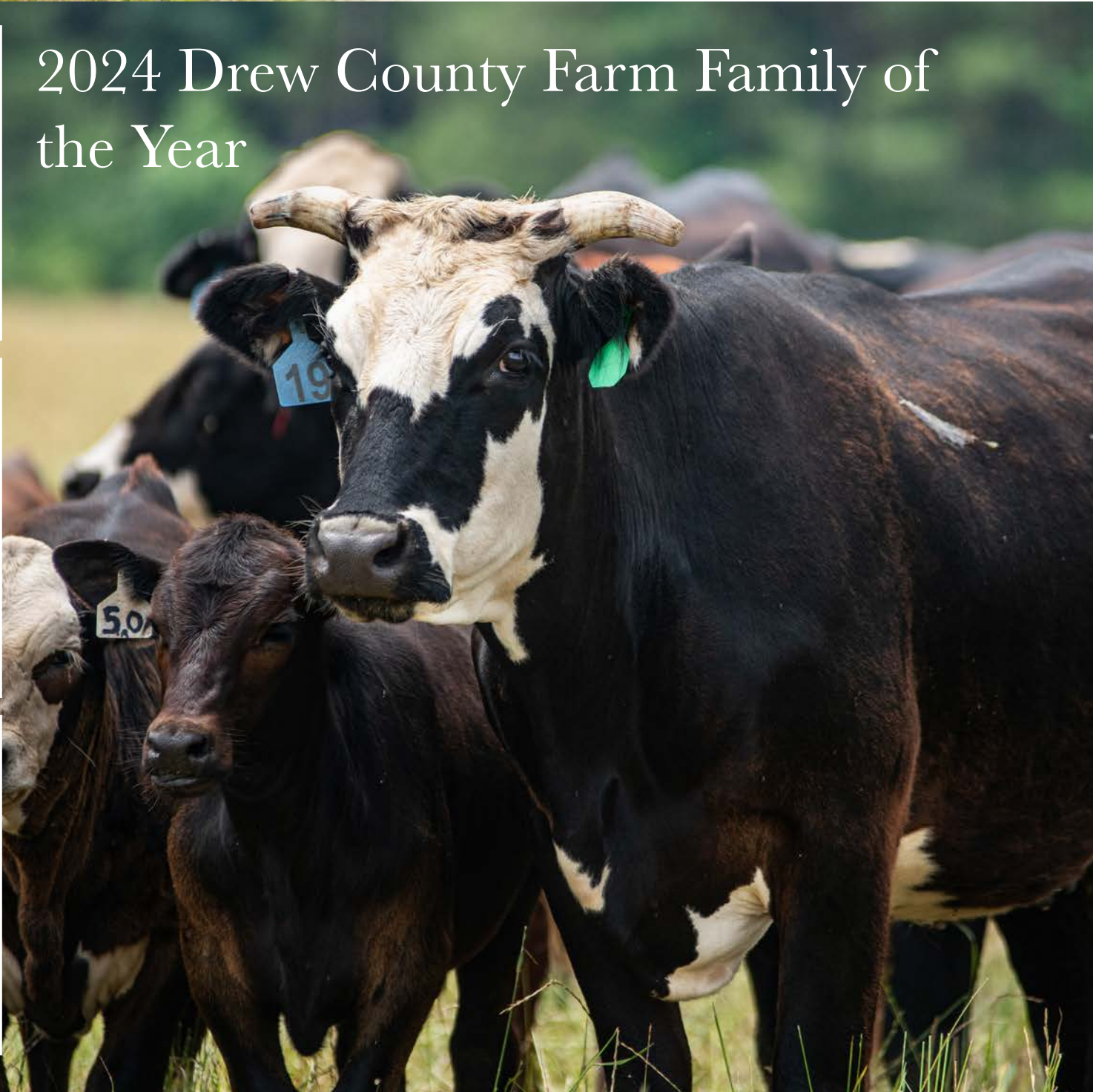
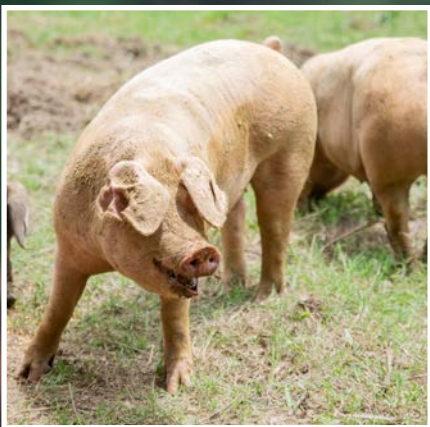


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The
**Cater
Family**



2024 Drew County Farm Family of
the Year



Embracing the farming lifestyle for six generations

By **JEFF McDONALD**
 editor@monticellonews.net

For most people involved in the agriculture industry, it isn't just a job, farming is a way of life. The 2024 Drew County Farm Family of the Year is no exception. Dr. Jason, Sara, Weston, and Tanner Cater are hands-on and involved in all aspects of the various farming endeavors the family has taken on throughout the years. The Cater family was honored with this award in 2013. After much growth and advancement, the selection committee thought this family was the perfect choice in 2024.

According to family history, the Cater family began farming in Drew County just after the Civil War ended.

"As far as we know, shortly after the Civil War, four Cater brothers came to Drew County and got some property in the area, part of which we still own to this day," Dr. Jason Cater said.

Dr. Cater represents the fifth generation of Caters to farm on these grounds.

"All of my people farmed until my dad," Dr. Cater added. "He was the first person in our family to go to college. He got his teaching degree and taught for nearly 30 years at Drew Central."

Dr. Cater recalls that his father and all of his uncles grew up picking cotton by hand. He added that whenever his grandfather retired in the late seventies, he had never owned a tractor or any other mechanical equipment, he did all of his work with mules and horses. Dr. Cater said that he is the first generation of his family that has not hand-picked cotton.

Dr. Cater's passion for farming was ignited when his father, Don Cater, gave him a special gift at the age of seven.

"I always enjoyed working with the cattle as I was growing up," Dr. Cater said. "My dad gave me my first cow when I was seven years old. I kept her and raised her, and I was able to breed her and raise several calves out of her."

As he progressed into his teenage years, Dr. Cater became more involved with the family's



All photos by Joanna Poole/Advance Monticellonian

Congrats to the 2024 Farm Family

**The
 Jason
 Cater
 Family**

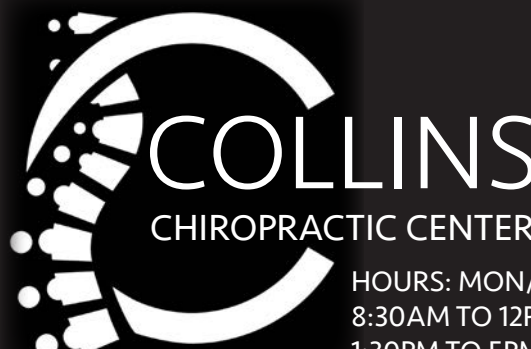


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cattle operation. It was during this time that Dr. Cater also worked on a tomato farm in Possum Valley.

“That job, in particular, taught me many things,” Dr. Cater said. “It certainly showed me what I did and did not want to do with my life.”

Over the next several years the Caters continued to increase their cattle herd, and his father began to lease additional land in the area.

Upon graduating high school, Dr. Cater attended the University of Arkansas at Monticello. During his time at UAM, he said that he always wanted to be a veterinarian. He was in the honors program which required additional coursework, and between his schoolwork and farm duties he began to feel burnt out.

During his senior year at UAM, Dr. Cater had a friend who introduced him to a man out of Rison which led to the opportunity to build his first two chicken houses. It was also around this same time that Dr. Cater would have another meeting that would change his life, the meeting of his future wife Sara.

Jason and Sara married during Spring Break of their senior year at UAM. They knew even before they graduated that they were going to build chicken houses. In August of 2000, they received their first birds. Dr. Cater’s father deeded 10 acres to the upstart couple to build the houses, and after borrowing \$360,000 they started their new enterprise.

The Caters raise hatching eggs in their chicken houses. These eggs are collected daily by an automated system. They are graded and packaged, with only the highest quality being trucked out to hatcheries which are typically located in either Canada or Mexico. After they hatch they are shipped to broiler houses where they are grown until time to send to kill houses for slaughter.

In 2004, Dr. Cater’s desire to be a veterinarian was reignited, but he was uncertain how he could attend vet school and maintain the farm. In the end, he applied to Mississippi State Veterinary School and was accepted for the fall semester. At this time, his oldest son, Weston, was two and a half years old, and his youngest son Tanner was still in utero. Fortunately for the Caters, they had hired a couple to work with them on the farm who were able to keep things running during this time. The

couple still works on the farm 24 years later.

During his first month of vet school, Dr. Cater, along with all of his classmates, was sent home due to the potential devastation of Hurricane Katrina. When he returned home, Sara was on bed rest pending Tanner’s arrival. The day after Dr. Cater returned home, they went to the hospital in Little Rock, and Tanner officially joined the family.

Dr. Cater returned to Mississippi State and finished the veterinary program. He returned home and began working on expanding his cattle herd again.

In 2009, the Caters began buying property in the area, including the land where the family’s home currently sits.

Since 2009, the family has purchased an additional 600 acres. Most of it was covered in Pine timber or cutovers. The Caters have since cleared the land and converted it to pasture land.

In 2014, the family purchased a piece of land referred to as the ‘Blythe Place’.

By 2016, they had paid off the first two chicken houses and decided to build two additional houses.

In 2019, the Caters bought a property called the Byrd Farm, where Weston currently resides. The Byrd Farm is a little over 1,000 acres, with 600 acres being devoted to cropland, two large reservoirs, and a large patch of hardwood timber.

The Byrd farm is a multipurpose site for the Caters. This is the site of all of the family’s row crop farming. The family started growing Sesame last year and plans to expand the crop this year.

“I didn’t know anything about Sesame before we started growing it,” Dr. Cater said. “It’s been a very interesting experience.”

Sesame is grown, at a contracted price, meaning the farmers will know what they stand to make before they ever plant the crop. The Caters are responsible for growing the Sesame and cutting it at harvest time, and trucks then come in and take the harvested crop to a facility in Western Oklahoma.

Dr. Cater says the crop is low maintenance. Another plus in this region is that deer and other wildlife don’t eat it, and it also receives no insect pressure.

See **CATERS** Page 6



Sara Cater sits behind her desk in her office where she helps the day-to-day operations of Cater Farms.

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CATERS

Continued from Page 4

Another facet of the Byrd Farm is that the family has devoted around 300 acres to the Quail Forever habitat program. These lands are planted with native grass and wildflowers which promote natural quail habitat. Dr. Cater said that since they have implemented the program they have seen populations of quail move into the area. The family won Quail Forever Farm of the Year this past year for their efforts.

The Byrd Farm also houses a farming venture that Sara was not a fan of, pigs.

“I was against pigs for many years,” Sara said.

“When I was growing up, we raised and fed out pigs. I have always liked fresh pork,” Dr. Cater added.

The Caters said that they are currently raising their pigs in what could be deemed an unusual setting.

“When we bought the Byrd Farm the previous owner had raised Ostriches on the site,” Dr. Cater said. “He had five large Ostrich pens which we have converted into hog pens.”

There are currently six pigs on the farm. The family hopes to breed them and be able to sell high-quality pigs in the future.

Throughout all the years and additions to their farming services, one thing has remained the same. The cattle herd has contin-



With this hydraulic cattle squeeze chute, Dr Jason Cater can examine his animals one by one, giving them the best care.

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ued to expand. This is due to an increase in pasture land, better grass production, and the implementation of rotational grazing.

“We do pretty intense rotational grazing out here which is not common in these parts,” Dr. Cater said. “Most people have a field and set cows in them and let it go. We have everything divided into smaller 20-acre paddocks. Our goal is to give each herd enough grass for one day. The next day we move them to the next paddock.”

Cater added that rotational grazing allows for the nutrients from manure and urine to be concentrated into smaller areas of ground which helps to build the quality of the soil over time. It also allows the grass to rest, which is

vital for it to reach its maximum growth potential.

“The goal is to run as many head of cattle on a particular place as possible,” Dr. Cater said. “You generate more income this way. If you have a 100-acre field, most people will run 40 head there, we can run right at 100 head on 100 acres. We didn’t inherit this we have to pay for it and that means being the best stewards we can.”

On the veterinary side of things, Dr. Cater spends most of his time working in the poultry field. He is currently performing flock inspections to verify that the flocks don’t have

See **CATERS** Page 10



Chickens and pigs are only two examples of what the Cater Family takes care of on a day-to-day basis.



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CATERS

Continued from Page 7

any viruses or bacteria before the hatching eggs are shipped to the Canadian and Mexican borders.

Dr. Cater also has crews that vaccinate pullets (young female chickens who aren't old enough to lay eggs) for several farmers. They also catch the pullets and deliver them to hen farms whenever they are old enough to begin laying eggs. These services are provided for eight companies over 13 complexes.

The Caters have also started 4C Trucking to facilitate the moving of the pullets, as well as hauling chicken feed, and even transporting broiler chickens to kill houses for Tyson. They own all of the trailers, but contract with truck owners to pull their equipment.

Additionally, the Caters purchased the Camden Animal Hospital three years ago. They have hired a classmate of Dr. Cater to run the facility and provide services to small animals.

As if they didn't already have a full plate, the Caters continue to branch out and dive

into new facets of farming. The Caters are the first farmers in Arkansas to commercial-ly plant Bamboo. The plants are nearing their first harvest and the Caters are excited to see how the process goes. In the spring, Bamboo shoots will be harvested for food, and in the fall barrels will be harvested for various purposes.

The family is also on the verge of starting another new venture. They will begin raising and selling roosters to other chicken farmers. Roosters are always in high demand, but no one has capitalized on being the farmers who can meet the demand. The family sees great potential in this venture and hopes to start it soon.

There is so much going on with the Caters and it is very impressive. When speaking with the sixth generation of Caters on the farm it is safe to say that the future is bright, and the legacy will continue. Weston who is a senior at UAM is finishing up his Ag Business degree and hopes to get involved in the poultry business upon his graduation. Tanner is a sophomore at Mississippi where he is majoring in Poultry Science/Pre-Vet. He plans to get more involved in the business side of the veterinary



services and hopes to get into poultry consulting like his dad.

"There are only about 20 veterinarians in the US who are involved in the poultry sciences who operate independently. Being an independent consultant is rare, but the demand is always growing," Dr. Cater said.

As the day wound down and our time with the Caters was drawing to a close Dr. Cater wanted to share what he called his most important job.

"The most important work I do is on Sun-

days and Wednesdays. I pastor Old Union Baptist Church, which I have done for nearly 11 years. This is by far the most important thing I do," Dr. Cater said.

The Cater family is the epitome of the American farming family. They embrace the lifestyle and meet the challenges head-on. They also embrace the entrepreneurial spirit that has always been at the heart of America. From the staff at the Advance, congratulations to a most deserving family.

From Delta fields to global markets: Arkansas' sesame revolution

By JOANNA POOLE
reporter@theeagleanddemocrat.com

For many, when they think of sesame, seeds and oil come to mind. We've all heard the phrase "on a sesame seed bun" from a well-known fast-food chain. These days, plentiful amounts of sesame oil can be found on grocery store shelves and is often used in Asian cuisine. Its high demand underscores its economic viability. But that doesn't mean that those products necessarily come from Asia. The sesame market overseas is large, and it's starting to grow in the United States. Farmers are learning that growing the tiny seed has many benefits.

Soybeans can sometimes cost \$350 per acre. Corn and cotton can cost as much as \$600 per acre. But sesame can be grown

for as little as \$100 per acre. Sesame is one of the oldest domesticated crops.

It's primarily cultivated in Africa and Asia, but it's starting to make its presence known here in the U.S. Farmers in Oklahoma and Texas have known about sesame for roughly 20 years. Some farmers started growing sesame due to a failed wheat crop. However, 2013 was the first year to see substantial acreage in Arkansas and Mississippi with approximately 25,000 acres.

Last year, the Cater family decided to take a chance on sesame. While Dr. Jason Cater didn't know anything about growing it, he said that the experience has been interesting. Sesame is a summer crop and in the Delta of Arkansas, it isn't uncommon to see very little rain in summer, mainly in July and August, making it a perfect crop

for farmers here. It's a low-input crop. It takes even less water than grain sorghum and cotton, which are the two most drought-tolerant crops. That quality may result from the taproot, which can extend as deep as six feet. That also makes it possible for the plant to sit in the field for as long as three months waiting to be cut.

Sesame takes around 120 days to mature making the wait time shorter compared to the 150-180 days that cotton takes to mature. That means farmers can harvest quicker and move on to the next thing.

Across the world, sesame has traditionally been cut by hand, but this method causes massive amounts of seed and profit loss. Farmers in the U.S. harvest with combines, which leads to very little loss of seed or profit.

One of the biggest pros of growing sesame is that local wildlife won't eat it. It's not uncommon for farmers who grow soybeans to have their crop ravaged by hogs and deer. But when it comes to sesame, some farmers have said that they have had hogs walk through their fields, but not damage anything. They don't have to be concerned about normal insects like worms, aphids, or stink bugs.

Every year, almost 1.6 million tons of sesame are traded across the world. Domestic use in the United States sits at 100,000 tons per year. Each seed is 50 percent oil and 50 percent protein.

Next time you go to eat that hamburger bun with those little seeds or grab a bottle of oil off the grocery store shelf, think about how that product could've started in Southeast Arkansas.

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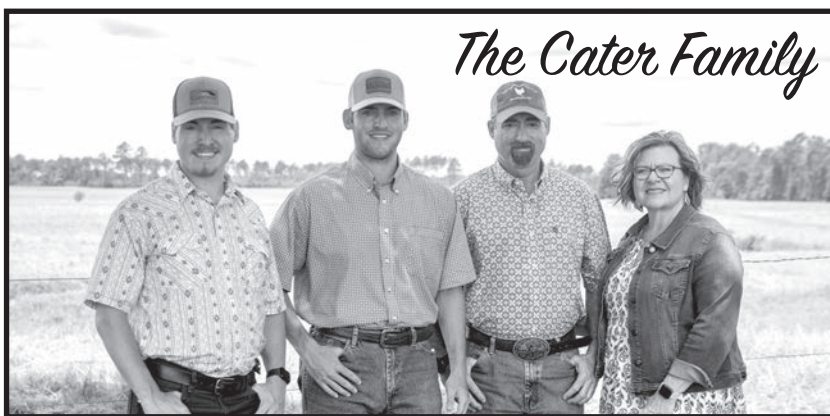
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Past Drew County Farm Family Award winners

YEAR	PRODUCER	TYPE OF FARM	YEAR	PRODUCER	TYPE OF FARM
2023	Dustin, Stephen and Mark Day and family	cropland	2002	James Shepherd	poultry
2022	Dr. Rocky Lindsey and family	timber/cattle/ruminants	2001	Billy Miller	cropland
2021	Jeff and Christine Felts	cropland	2000	C.H. Stafford	cattle
2020	Edward and Angela Schenk	cropland	1999	Phillip Morris	cropland
2019	Eddie Eubanks family	produce, hay/cattle	1998	Charlotte, Von and David Eubanks	tomatoes
2018	Tony Adams family	cropland	1997	Mar Miles and Jeff Felts	cropland
2017	Mike McGregor family	hay/cattle	1996	John Sims	cropland
2016	Rusty and Karla Mitchell	chickens	1995	Shannon Pace	tomatoes
2015	Frank and Jacob Appleberry family	cropland	1994	Dwight Witcher	cattle
2014	Rob Jones III	timber	1993	Paul Peacock Jr.	cropland
2013	Jason and Sara Cater family	chickens/cattle	1992	Thad Freeland	cropland
2012	Thad Mitchell family	chickens/hay	1991	David Oltmann	cropland
2011	No selection		1990	Frank Appleberry	cropland
2010	James and Rene Knowles	cattle/logging	1989	Eddie Eubanks	tomatoes
2009	Eric, Joel and Norris Stephens	cropland	1988	John Staudinger	cropland
2008	Michael and Jeremy Oltmann	cropland	1987	Jerry Pamplin	cropland
2007	Glynn and Bryan Gibson	cattle	1986	James Schenk	cropland
2006	No selection		1985	Glen Crow family	cropland
2005	Eddie Barnes	tomatoes	1984	Richie Hopper	cropland/cattle
2004	Larry Miles family	cropland	1983	Doy Ogles	cropland
2003	Joe Hayden	cattle	1982	T.K. Woods	cropland

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New system of grazing is holistically beneficial

By **JEFF McDONALD**
 editor@monticellonews.net

As I stood there looking at several hundred head of cattle, who were in turn looking at me, for just a moment I felt like Rip Wheeler on the Dutton Ranch. No, I really didn't, I just wanted to get your attention, dear reader. While talking with Dr. Jason, Sara, Weston, and Tanner Cater, Dr. Cater said that he has begun to use a new method to graze his cattle, one that is not commonly used in this region. He stated that using this method he can graze 100 head of cattle on the same patch of land that most cattle farmers only graze 40 to 50 head. What is this method and how does it work? Join me on a journey as we take a quick look at rotational grazing.

The first question to answer is, what is rotational grazing? Simply put, it is the practice of containing and moving animals

through pasture land to improve soil quality, plant growth, and animal health.

When implementing rotational grazing only one portion of a pasture is grazed at a time. While this section is grazed the remaining pasture "rests". Pastures are subdivided into smaller sections called paddocks. Cattle are then moved from one paddock to the next in a predetermined rotation.

Resting paddock allows the foraged plants to recover and even deepen their root systems. Why is this important? If cattle, or any livestock for that matter, are left alone on a patch of land they can quickly destroy all signs of life and compact the soil as they travel. If managed through rotational grazing, the soil tends to see big returns. Grazing encourages plants to send out more and deeper roots. These roots continually slough off and decompose in the soil, boosting soil biomass and fertility and sequestering carbon from the atmosphere. Rotational graz-

ing also helps to prevent erosion and agricultural runoff.

Generally, rotationally grazed pastures show great yields, digestibility, and animal performance when compared to continually grazed pastures and animals.

Typically, if a farmer had three paddocks, they would allow each one to be grazed for three weeks straight, allowing the other two to rest for six weeks each. Another aspect of this is that manure distribution is more efficient, acting as a source of nutrients for the soil.

Rotational grazing also has the potential to reduce machine costs, fuel, supplemental feeding, and the amount of forage wasted.

One of the most desirable attributes is that farmers can design a system to fit their needs. Farmers can control the timing and intensity of the forage grazed.

Critics of rotational grazing argue that the need for additional fencing is costly and

time-consuming. They would also argue that a lot of time is lost having to constantly move cattle from one paddock to the next, as well as the extra labor of providing water and shade in each paddock.

The type of grazing system that is best suited for a given farmer will depend on their goals and resources. Rotational grazing allows a farmer a better opportunity to use livestock to manage grasses, legumes, and weeds.

It's safe to say that rotational grazing is more labor-intensive than continuous grazing. Even so, the benefits to the soil, plants, and cattle would lead me to believe that the extra effort is worth it whenever the final product is delivered. For those of you who are still with me, I promise I won't try my hand as a farmhand, I'll leave that to the professionals like the Caters.



Broiler breeder farms are an egg-cellent choice

By **JEFF McDONALD**
 editor@monticellonews.net

If you are like me, whenever you hear someone say that they have chicken houses a specific picture pops into your head. I've always pictured an enormous, long room filled with thousands of chickens awaiting their time to be taken to a facility where they would be slaughtered, processed, and shipped to grocery stores all across America. That would be partially correct if it were a house that raised broiler chickens, but for the farmers who are operating broiler breeder farms, things look a little different.

When asking the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg, the answer can be more complicated than most people think. In the chicken industry, all of these

fluffy chicks that will grow up and end up on dinner tables nationwide have to come from somewhere, the simple answer is they come from a hatchery. That leads to the question, "How do they get to the hatchery?" This is where broiler breeder farms enter the picture.

Broiler breeder farms are operated by broiler-hatching egg farmers. These farmers raise hens and roosters who will be the parents of the broiler chickens. When speaking with Dr. Jason Cater, he said that on average each of the chicken houses holds right at 11,000 chickens, 10,000 being hens and the other 1,000 roosters. These hens and roosters will mate to produce fertilized eggs, which are not the same as the unfertilized table eggs that we eat. These fertilized eggs are transferred to hatcheries in either Cana-

da or Mexico for incubation.

Broiler breeders' lives happen in two stages, rearing and breeding. Many farmers have separate "pullet barns" where the females are raised until they are transferred to the breeding houses. A pullet is the technical term for a hen that hasn't started laying eggs yet.

Hens generally begin laying eggs at approximately 26 weeks old. Each hen will lay between 145 and 150 eggs before the end of their expected laying period which is approximately 35 to 40 weeks later.

These farms have automated egg gathering systems where the eggs gently roll from the nest box onto a conveyor belt, then to a station where the eggs are gathered and graded. Hatching eggs are gathered several times a day, and only those that meet specifications are sent to be hatched, the others are graded as culls. Eggs are typically picked up once or twice a week. Dr. Cater stated that there could be as many as seven million eggs in each truckload.

Upon their arrival at the hatchery, the eggs are placed in incubators where they are kept warm and automatically turned at regular intervals. At around the 21-day mark, the eggs should begin to hatch. The incubators would then be opened to reveal thou-

sands of fluffy little chicks who have pecked their way to freedom.

At the hatchery, the chicks can be vaccinated to protect them from common poultry diseases, much like we vaccinate human babies to protect them from disease.


It is crucial that the chicks are kept warm and protected from drafts as they are readied to be transported. They are carefully placed in clean and disinfected crates. Once the crates are in the climate-controlled truck, they are ready to begin the journey to their new homes, a chicken house where they will be raised for about 35 days until they become market-ready broiler chickens.

At this point, the broiler breeder farmers have long since been out of the process with these chickens, and are more than likely preparing the next batch of eggs for transport.

The poultry industry in Arkansas is big business, and from my humble observations, thriving. With Tyson being the largest chicken producer in the US, it seems that our great state will always have strong ties to the industry. This brief glimpse into the early stages of poultry production was eye-opening and shed light on an aspect of chicken farms I was unaware existed.



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