

Just Farmers: [an informal agricultural newsletter](#)

Vol. 2, No. 19 October 15, 2015

Foundation: We are stewards, not owners, of the land we farm. We are accountable for the way our land use affects the environment which includes land, water, air, plants, animals, and human beings.

News and Views:

- A local supermarket just send out a flier advertising asparagus at \$3.96/lb. The asparagus is a “product of Mexico or Peru, no. 1 grade.” We raise our own asparagus, but if we had to buy it Mr. Dave Cody of Telkwa would be our source. We have had asparagus in a number of rather high-end restaurants in the U.S. and Canada and can attest to the abundance of fibre and the lack of taste. After eating we thought of saving the fibre and braiding it for baler twine.

Comments on B.V. Cattlemen’s Field Day:

- Norm Dueck (HeartLand Soil & Crop Solutions): “Take care of the home acre first. I’ve said it many time and one of my goals is to prove it to be true to as many farmers as possible. We can produce more with less.”
- Wendy Siemens gave us a helpful summary of crop insurance. She noted that range and pasture are not covered.
- I’m quite sure Wendy would be the first to agree that managed, improved, or dedicated pastures (choose your term) can produce as much or more dry matter per acre than taking a cut of hay. We [editor] think that the entire cattle industry in central B.C. needs to rethink the importance of pastures (this

conference and last year’s *Carrots to Cattle* conference were beginnings). As long as we think of the “home acre” as a hayfield and scruffy land or range land as relatively cheap grazing “until the hay is in,” we’ll be wasting money, time, and effort, especially if we turn the cattle loose to “eat the roots” on our hayfields in late summer.

- **Query:** If any one of our readers has used a frame to measure seedling success or a cage to measure crop damage due to wildlife (Wendy Siemens showed us some photos) we’d love to have photos and your comments.
- Graeme Finn, our keynote speaker, used \$200/tonne as the value of dairy manure. Compare that to the price of chemical fertilizers and consider making better use of feedlot or stockpiled manure.
- Graeme Finn also mentioned his way of using electric fences with wooden posts. He bores a hole through the wooden post, puts a piece of garden hose through it and threads the electric fence through that. He uses a ground wire below “right on the wood.”



Matt Taylor, president of the B.V. Cattlemen’s Association, hosted the conference. Here he is introducing the keynote speaker, Graeme Finn.

- Graeme Finn recommended soft, tall fescue for fall, set-aside grazing.



Barenbrug is one seed company that produces this. If you know of a dealer who will stock this item, let us know and we will publish that information.

- We heard the phrase “endophyte-free fescue” during the conference. “An endophyte is an endosymbiont, often a bacterium or fungus, that lives within a plant for at least part of its life cycle without causing apparent disease.” Don’t be alarmed by “endosymbiont” (which sounds like a creature from *Star Trek*). Endophytes help plants in some ways and are helped by plants in turn in other ways. Early fescues (especially Kentucky 31) had serious negative effects on livestock grazing them. When you choose a tall fescue for forage, choose an endophyte-free variety, available from almost all seed companies. If it doesn’t say, “endophyte-free” don’t buy it.

Source: Google, which knows everything.



Getting ready to begin the conference with Matt in the background and someone really in a hurry to begin in the foreground.

- “Studies with animals consuming endophyte-infected fescue have shown the following responses in comparison to animals grazing non-infected fescue: (1) lower feed intake; (2) lower weight gains; (3) lower milk production; (4) higher respiration rates; (5) higher body temperatures; (6) rough hair coats; (7) more time spent in water; (8) more time spent in the shade; (9) less time spent

grazing; (10) excessive salivation; (11) reduced blood serum prolactin levels; and (12) reduced reproductive performance. Some or all of these responses have been observed in numerous studies in dairy cattle, beef cattle, and sheep consuming endophyte-infected pasture, green chop, hay and/or seed.”

<http://grasslands.clemson.edu/Forage%20Species/Tall%20Fescue/Tall%20Fescue.htm>



Graeme Finn ready to roll and trying to remember (unsuccessfully) how to say “manure” and “urine.”

- Final note on endophytes. When endophytes are eliminated to prevent toxicity to grazers, something is lost, too—the help the endophytes give the host plants (fescue, in this instance). Recent research about trying to find an endophyte that can “infect” fescue but not hurt grazing animals.
- One of the main things I (cg) learned from Graeme Finn is the importance of trying things out, often on a small scale (part-field or long strip). One of the conference participants didn’t speak to

the group as a whole but told me later, “All those plants he mentioned [sainfoin, cicermilkvetch, etc.] I’ve tried and grown for years. When somebody tells me it can’t be done, I go out and try it.”

- We will have a short report on the soil health conference (held October 15 at Round Lake Hall) in the next issue which will be either Nov. 1 or 15.

Graeme Finn: Just try it.”



Alfalfa with roots to stop a plow: a wonderment **That old variety is probably still around.**

Perhaps you’ve heard stories like these:

- *When we bulldozed a lane on the edge of our alfalfa field we found roots over twelve feet deep.*
- *I was ploughing up a useless old field with about one week of grazing on it per year and hit an alfalfa root so strong the plough couldn’t cut it.*
- *There used to be a field at the old experimental farm that had some variety of alfalfa on it that was better than Peace or any modern variety. It lasted over twenty years. I wish we had combined it somehow and saved the seed.*

When Dan Undersander spoke about alfalfa last year at a conference in Vanderhoof, he brought a wealth of knowledge from his studies and tests done on alfalfa in Wisconsin and other places. In those heartlands of dairying corn is not king, nor soybeans: alfalfa is probably the most profitable crop of the three either for sale or for feed.

In Wisconsin, my home state, alfalfa is nowadays often a three-year crop—seeding year plus two more. Then back to corn, soybeans and so on. What would happen if we bred for longevity or long-term grazing rather than multiple cuts? And where would we get those old, resilient varieties (probably with a trade name of Methuselah)?

Just outside our living room window is a tiny field that is made up—for the most part—of gravel with a couple parts of soil. Since 1991, when we moved to the property, I remember once it produced a good crop—when it rained and rained and rained until July 1. Otherwise, one measly cut of hay and then mostly brown all summer, with the exception of dandelions, daisies, and a few field scabious. An adventurous red clover stuck up its bloom every so far. But what was most remarkable about the field

in my opinion was the presence of a half dozen alfalfa plants that sprouted out after mowing and then spread outward and upward until the deer nipped the buds in October. They must have iron constitutions. I decided to do something about it. The following photos and captions describe the great adventure. If it produces usable results, I'll write about it in a couple years if (*deo volente*) I'm still around. You'll see me listed right under Pickseed, Monsanto, and Cargill.

Notes:

1. I've never done this before, but I guess I need to do at least these steps. 1/check the seed for germination next spring; 2/inoculate; 3/plant in small pots or trays in a select location (greenhouse) and carefully monitored piece of garden soil; 4/water and weed the first year; 5/record data on growth, roots, etc.; 6/harvest seed from select plants and propagate; 7/ sell seed and get rich.

2. I've been grazing the field pictured below for a number of years. Part of it has now improved through carefully-monitored grazing, top-seeding every year with grasses and clovers, and a small amount of composted manure. On the very best strip—about 20 feet wide—I can get 4-5 grazings per year by my few Dexters. This is really quick-in and quick-out grazing because of the shallowness of the soil (wherever it is).



1. The gravel patch with some orchard grass .



2. What's that? A clump of alfalfa.



3. Rufus, the forage hound on point.



4. Does alfalfa benefit grasses living nearby through its decaying roots and rhizobia?



5. Alfalfa pods with green grass showing through.



6. Alfalfa seed pods and seeds, some unripe, some ripe.