Overview
In the mid-1990s, farmer Greg Judy was facing down the possibility of bankruptcy. Significant debt from building his conventional cattle operation, combined with a divorce, left it likely he’d lose everything. While this is a profile of a grazing operation, it’s also a tale of the determination, ingenuity and bit of desperation that inspire great farmers. Greg’s crisis propelled experimentation, and he found a new way to approach ranching. Years of trial and error, reading, and learning from other graziers, taught Greg that when he focuses on the building soil and growing grass, the cattle thrive, his input costs diminish, and his farm is profitable. Now a highly successful grazier and author, Greg is constantly teaching a new generation of grass-fed beef producers.

Early Efforts
Greg Judy was just seven when he announced that he wanted to be a cattle rancher. What he didn’t yet know was the kind of cattle rancher he wanted to be. When Greg first bought Green Pastures Farm, he sought advice from ag colleges and conventional producers, and worked with the extension service. He bought land, cattle, and lots of machinery. He focused on big-framed cattle, high weaning weights, and hay production. And, in following this approach, he accumulated more debt on his land, cattle, and machinery than he could realistically repay.
As Greg says, “We were doing everything wrong in the early 90’s and I was going bankrupt. I loved the land, I loved the animals, and I thought, there had to be some way for me to do what I love to do.” To recover, in 1996, Greg sold everything but his farm, forcing him to explore new business models. He began to imagine shifting his management approach, reading anything and everything he could get his hands on regarding innovative grazing and reducing hay use and machinery. Greg decided his conventional continuous grazing strategy was not a sustainable way of managing either his cattle or his land. Instead of purchasing more land, he began leasing, and instead of focusing on hay production, he became excited about grass.

A New Direction
Armed with new ideas and very little available capital, Greg dramatically changed his strategy. He began doing custom cow/calf grazing, both on his own farm and leased land, earning income based on the Average Daily Gain (ADG) of weight for the cattle. Greg’s first foray into rotational grazing was with the Managed Intensive Grazing (MIG) approach, which revolves around short, intense grazing periods in small areas, long plant recovery times, and little reliance on stored forages. While an improvement over continuous grazing, Greg found, on his land, MIG was creating an issue of inconsistent forage availability, reducing his ability to build adequate forage stockpiles for the fall and winter months. Due to the short vegetative condition of his forages, once the heat and dry conditions of late summer hit, the grass withered and was very slow to recover.

The Right Approach for Greg
In 2006, Greg Judy was introduced to holistic High Stock Density (HSD) or “Mob” grazing. This reinforced his understanding that one’s grazing approach could dramatically impact the availability and seasonality of grass. He saw almost immediate improvements in forage availability, and began to see increases in soil organic matter and strengthening soil microbe populations. This, in turn, decreased the acreage needed by each cow, allowing him to increase his herd size. HSD grazing created pressure for the cattle to eat what was in front of them, thus reducing their tendency to eat the tastiest plants, leaving weeds to thrive. Greg determined that his previous approach, allowing his cattle to eat what grass they wanted and what supplemental hay they chose, was babying them. “I’d been working for the cattle instead of making them work for me.” With HSD grazing, the cattle were not only gaining weight without supplement, they were doing the work of re-building soils and increasing forage availability for him.

In implementing MIG grazing, Greg realized he had relied too heavily on the instructions he received from other producers, working in different conditions. As he transitioned to HSD grazing, Greg came to trust his instincts, and to keep the grazing strategy flexible to respond to what nature provides and he prioritizes at any given time. Greg’s trial-and-error approach to various grazing strategies provides an important lesson for new farmers interested in grass-based agriculture: continuous experimentation is necessary to find the approaches that best suit the goals and conditions of a specific farm.
Building a Strong Herd

Fascinated by the amazing genetic adaptations animal express in response to variable climates, Greg began to investigate the South Poll breed of cattle conceived by Teddy Gentry and researched by Dr. Allen Williams. South Polls are a combination of Red Angus, Hereford, Barzona, and Senepol, and are adapted to perform well in southern environments and on southern forages. Through selective breeding and culling, within just five years, Greg was able to establish a stable South Poll-influenced herd that worked well on his land.

Many grassfed beef operations benefit from using slightly smaller breeds with lower frame scores (3-4.5) than conventionally raised cattle (5+), as these smaller breeds tend to reach mature weights quicker and require less maintenance overall. New ranchers should take time to research the variety of cattle breeds adapted to a wide variety of climates, environments, and grazing strategies.

It’s About the Soil

Greg is quick to clarify that he is not a cattle farmer. He no longer embraces the term grass farmer either. “We need to look even further down and call ourselves microbe farmers,” he declares. The short, heavy grazing periods associated with high stock density grazing have improved the soil health on Judy Farms immensely, largely through the combination of trampling and the laying down of manure abounding with microbes. Studying his fields, Greg started taking cues from the growth of the plants as to when it was time to graze again. “[Before] we were grazing these plants off short, so we had these little bitty roots under them coming into the summer heat period. With drought in July, grasses went dormant...and we didn’t have any winter feed for our animals. It always bothered me.”

Today, Greg studies the grasses, seeing if the plant is fully mature and the roots established. Then the cattle are allowed to eat several inches off the tips, but don’t stay long enough in a given area to destroy whole plants. The result is a significant amount of trampled grass keeping the soil surface cool and becoming part of the organic matter building up the topsoil. Both the cool temperatures and organic inputs are critical to maintaining healthy microbial populations. The health of these populations in turn promotes more rapid grass growth and higher nutrient levels in the plants. Today, Greg is also working with compost teas to further expand and balance fungal and bacterial microbe populations.
Finding Success
In 2006, the condition of Greg’s land and resources required a minimum of 4 acres of forage annually for each cow/calf unit. By 2011, Greg was stocked at a rate of 1.8 acres/AUM. For Greg, this is the equivalent of free land. He now practices year round grazing with very few supplemental inputs. He calves with nature in the spring and early summer and winters the calves on the cow. He refuses to baby his animals. Each cow must be able to make it on forage alone, breed back quickly after calving, raise a calf for 9-10 months, give adequate but not excessive milk, finish by the end of their 2nd year, and reach a mature weight of around 1000-1100 lbs. Four to five years of genetic selection and heavy culling have paid off in significantly reduced input costs and a herd of relatively hassle-free cattle that perform to his specifications.

Key Values
Greg has eloquently defined a series of principles critical to the success of his operation, Green Pastures Farm. Greg believes that cattle are only as healthy as the grass they graze and the soil that nourishes it. Improving soil health is a key component of increasing forage productivity, and Greg has seen his soil health benefit immensely from the short, heavy grazing periods associated with high stock density grazing. These and other sustainable farming practices are integral to the Green Pastures Farm mission. Through his grazing strategy, Greg has been able to attract native wildlife to his land, minimize fossil-fuel use, and do away with the need for synthetic fertilizers, dramatically reducing input costs.

Greg invests significant time each year hosting field days, attending conferences and conducting workshops to educate others in the tenets of high stock density grazing and sustainable farming. He also regularly hires interns to provide them with hands-on field experience so that they may start their own grazing operations in the future. Greg sees every moment as a teaching opportunity, and works hard to spread his message that grass-fed cattle are better for the land, better for the environment, and better for the consumer.

Learn More!
• Greg Judy is the author of “No Risk Ranching” and “Comeback Farms,” in which he relates his struggles and experiences with grazing, outlining how to make an effective transition into a profitable grassfed cattle operation.
• Learn more about Judy Farms and shop their online store, at www.greenpasturesfarm.net.

This is the first in a series of case studies by The Pasture Project, a collaboration to expand grass-based agriculture in the Midwest. For more information or to see what’s new, visit our website at www.pastureproject.org.