

From the Executive Director:

Silvopasture is Next-Level Soil Health

By [SFA of MN](#) | January 25, 2019

Minnesota has over 650,000 acres of unmanaged farm woodlands that are being grazed by livestock but are yielding limited economic and environmental benefits. Without active management of livestock, forage and trees, this practice produces limited forage, lower weight gain, environmental challenges and little to no soil health benefits.

That statistic was shared at SFA's Greater Mille Lacs Chapter annual meeting on Sunday by Diomy Zamora, Extension Educator/Professor with the University of Minnesota Extension, who presented the basics of "Silvopasture in Minnesota."

[According to the U. of M.](#), "As an agroforestry practice, silvopasture intentionally integrates livestock, forage production and trees into an intensively managed system. The forage, trees and livestock in silvopasture complement each other to increase productivity. This provides annual income from livestock while fostering long-term economic benefits from trees including timber, fence posts, firewood, fruit and nuts."

With input from SFA President Jim Chamberlin, Diomy described various types of silvopasture operations in Minnesota and the Upper Midwest, using a variety of trees, livestock and forage. Silvopasture is built around the premise that either a forest is thinned or modified to allow more sunlight for plants, grasses and forbs to grow and livestock to be added; or a pasture is changed by planting various types of trees, either in rows, clusters or dispersed. The result, if managed, is a savanna that boasts healthy soil and greater soil organic matter, more forage, managed grazing opportunities and improved income.

SFA Secretary Joe Gans and daughter Sarah shared their silvopasture story at Wellspring Farms, where several acres of dense woods was selectively harvested and opened up. They reported that the forest floor had an amazingly abundant seed bed, rich with grasses and forbs. Additional seeding hasn't been required. This land is now available for managed grazing as part of their overall farming operation.

SFA is a partner with the University of Minnesota and others on a silvopasture project that, if funded (funding is so far confirmed), will support the creation of a Silvopasture Network. The goal is to reach out to farmers and landowners throughout the state to educate on silvopasturing principles and practices and foster greater adoption. Regenerating our landscape through silvopasturing will be another chapter in SFA's soil health story. Stay tuned.

- **Related:** SFA member and expert farmer Tom Barthel writes occasional blog posts for his Snake River Farm that he graciously allows us to publish on SFA's website. Three have recently been added, including "[Restoring Savannas With Bison](#)" that describes principles similar to silvopasture. Find them all and much more on our [Soil Health Resources page](#).