

## **This weather makes me thankful I am a grass farmer**

An often quoted Chinese curse goes something like, "May you live in interesting times." The meaning apparently is that "interesting" times will be troubled times. The same might be said about weather.

Perhaps our weather has always been "interesting" but recent years seem to be exceptionally interesting.

Many of us have experienced severe drought, amazing amounts of rain, intense and prolonged heat and a record long and cool winter, strong storms and destructive winds. Those weather events have come one close on the heels of the other. The rate of change has been head spinning.

I raised row crops for many years but now our entire farm is in pasture.

The comparisons between the effects of extreme weather on row crops and the effects of extreme weather on grass lands are major and easy to see.

Well managed grazing land is superbly tolerant of most weather extremes.

In the past decade we have had many prolonged dry periods mixed with as much as ten inches of rain in a couple of days.

The soil erosion that we used to see from water and wind no longer occurs. The grass holds the soil wonderfully.

We have learned to make our pastures more drought tolerant by mixing many species of grass, forbs and legumes.

In every season or year, the forage plant that is best suited for the existing weather thrives.

Some plant species seem to disappear but in fact, they just wait for their chance to do well.

In each of the past two years, our rains stopped by midsummer. The cool season plants with shallow roots went dormant. The warm season grasses with their deep roots and heat tolerance continued growing. They did not seem to notice the drought.

The weather this spring (Was there a spring?) has been particularly difficult.

I know many of you have had plenty of rain, but until late June, we had been getting by on only meager rains.

Coupled with the cold spring, our pastures were mediocre at best.

Near the end of June, we got several inches of rain and our grasslands took off in what can only be described as incredible spring growth.

Spring growth in early summer. For a grass farmer, good grass is delightful at anytime.

The cool season grasses that were dormant or seemed non-existent last year and early this spring quickly grew to hip height.

Good pastures restrain heavy rains thus reducing runoff.

Our water table is now restored to normal height. Our wetlands are now well soaked.

That means the lowland pastures will produce well into fall no matter what summer brings.

The warm season grasses are starting to grow. Those deep rooted plants have enough water throughout the soil profile to last them all summer.

Most row crops around here are having a poor year.

Very few corn or bean fields were planted by the normal date.

Many spots in those planted fields are now flooded. Some fields could not be planted at all.

I know it is not for everyone, and I understand that distorted prices for land make it difficult to use good cropland for grass, but some lands, especially marginal lands can make productive and profitable pastures. Even, or especially, in variable weather.

If you can access or build a market for grass-fed meat, you can sell it at a good price.

It helps to be near an urban area but we are finding that even rural people are having a hard time locating good sources of meat. I suppose that is a result of the intense concentration of production.

Many farmers who may spend much of their time on a tractor have no contacts for bison, beef or pork.

Grass farming can be good for you, for your land, for your animals and for your customers.

I hope your summer is the best it can be.

Best regards.

Tom Barthel, Secretary and Director at Large.