

NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant Final Report from On Pasture

Grantee Entity Name: *On Pasture*

Project Title: Reaching and Teaching the Next Generation of Farmers and Ranchers

Agreement Number: 69-3A75-17-49

Project Director: Kathy Voth, kathy@onpasture.com, 520-326-8751

Reporting Period: November 1, 2016 - November 30, 2019

Project End Date: November 30, 2019

Nov 2016
Nov 2017

ON PASTURE.COM

Translating research and experience into practices graziers can use NOW

Project Background

On Pasture (<https://onpasture.com>)

is a weekly, online magazine for graziers. It originated at a grazing conference where Kathy Voth and her fellow farmers, ranchers, agency staff, and researchers sat down to talk about why farmers and ranchers were slow to adopt science-based conservation practices that benefit them. The group concluded that producers and scientists speak very different languages. So, busy producers don't understand what the results mean to them, what new practices are indicated, and they have little time to differentiate between practices that work and those that don't.

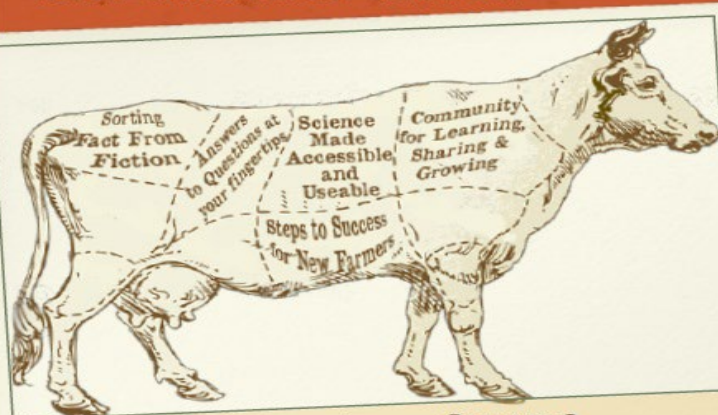
On Pasture has worked on solving that problem for the past 7 years, successfully increasing the pace and scale of conservation adoption nationwide by publishing seven new articles each week. Our articles translate research and experience into farm-ready practices to

improve soil health, grow more forage, protect water quality, enhance wildlife habitat and, of course, increase profitability.

This combination of translation, proven practices, and a community of innovation has been very popular. Seven years in, over 100,000 readers visit the site each month, making **On Pasture** the most read grazing resource around. Readers say they appreciate the plain language science, useful practices, and sense of community. **On Pasture** is also making a difference with 95% of readers saying they have changed how they think or what they do as a result of something they read here.

This report covers the three years of funding that **On Pasture** received from the Natural Resources Conservation Service from November 2016 through November 2019.

On Pasture's Vision



IDEAS ARE SEEDS
GROWING SUSTAINABILITY & PROFITABILITY

FOUNDED MARCH 2013

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Summary of Methods and Activities

Building a Community of Innovation: An Incentive Program Based in Social Science

At first glance, it might seem like

On Pasture is doing is publishing articles every week. But that's only one aspect of our efforts. We're also building a community of innovation that increases adoption of conservation practices.

As Everett Rogers noted in his seminal research on innovation adoption, the speed of change increases when farmers and ranchers learn from trusted sources and their peers. That's why building credibility was our first order of business. We began by publishing "how-to" articles, grounded in science and proven conservation standards. We combined this with articles demonstrating how this information was put into practice by farmers and

ranchers who described the benefits they experienced. This approach to adoption-diffusion – **science delivered by peers** – has seen success the world over. It also created credibility that we were able to use when introducing new concepts.

The combination of science and peer examples was also the catalyst for what has become a community of graziers learning and growing together. As part of the **On Pasture Community**, readers' incentive to change isn't only monetary, but psychological as well and, therefore, even more powerful.

This approach is also very popular with our readers. In just six short years, **On Pasture** became the most read grazing resource around with over

110,000 readers a month. The average reader stops by at least twice a month and reads 3.5 articles. **We also know that we're making a difference!** A remarkable 95% of readers say they've changed the way they think or what they do based on something they've read in **On Pasture**.

Finally, **On Pasture** staff participated in at least 3 conferences/workshops each year of the grant. This allowed us to expand our reach by meeting new and current readers in person. It also provided the opportunity to share research and practices that were helpful to farmers and ranchers

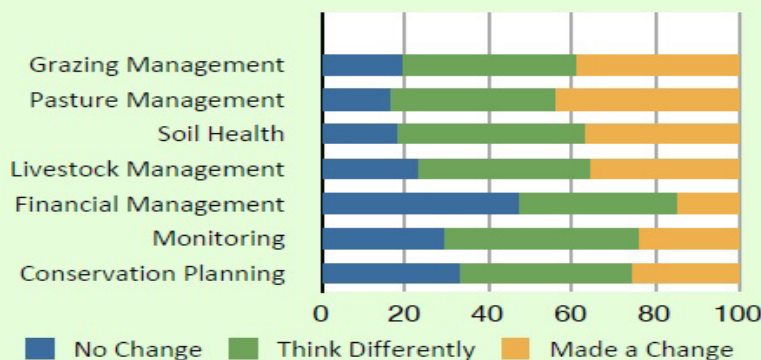
On Pasture Makes a Difference!

95%
Think differently or
made a change
thanks to On Pasture.



5%
Have experience
and appreciate the
reinforcement.

How Do Survey Respondents Use On Pasture?



I look at almost all aspects of my farm differently than I used to. I'm much more aware of how pastures look, how long they have been grazed and what's going on under the sod. Plus I tell farmer friends about what I do or what I've read. I've recommended this site to numerous people. [Reader]

I LOVE On Pasture! The articles are relevant, insightful and delightful. I love hearing about how others are applying principles and observing results, learning and growing in their abilities. It's like having a knowledgeable mentor who shows you all their trials. [Reader]

Summary of Methods and Activities continued

Content, Authors and Writers in Residence

Every Tuesday morning, **On Pasture** publishes articles in eight categories. **Grazing Management, Pasture Health, Livestock, and Money Matters** are topics a successful grazer must address every day. Because all work and no play makes us all dull, we add some food for thought (**Consider This**), a little laughter (**The Funnies**), and a note from **On Pasture** editors (**The Scoop**). Finally, we share a timely article from our 2,500+ archive of articles (**The Classic by NatGLC**). This ensures that great information isn't lost as our readership constantly increases.

We reach readers with a Tuesday morning email, and via Facebook and Twitter. About 12,000 readers receive the email newsletter describing the week's new articles. The newsletter is posted on our Facebook page and Twitter feed. We also post one article a day on

Facebook and Twitter to reach as many readers as possible.

Authors

Kathy Voth, **On Pasture** publisher and editor writes about 50% of the articles. For the rest, she scours the internet for helpful information and publications from extension faculty, sorts through material from Science Daily and Eureka Alert, and looks at all materials provided by NRCS/USDA to all media outlets. Other sources include Noble Research Institute, Beef Cattle Research Council, Soil Health Institute, Nature, Science, and many more. Kathy also works with volunteers who would like to share their experience and knowledge with their **On Pasture** community. She works with these new authors to



help them develop and sharpen their writing skills. She also works with extension faculty and NRCS staff to edit pieces so that they fit with **On Pasture's** editorial and content style.

The result is a publication that serves graziers with the most up-to-date information, in a format that is easy to read and that highlights principles and how-to steps to help readers adopt and adapt practices to a wide variety of operation types and styles.



Behind the scenes, Kathy is assisted by **Peter Williams**. Peter handles site

maintenance and security to protect **On Pasture** from the 30,000 monthly hack attempts. He also works with advertisers and sponsors to bring in additional funding.

Writers in Residence

Thanks to the support of the Jena and Michael King Family Foundation, **On Pasture** was able to pay a group of authors for their work for the first time. The Writers in Residence program focused on providing examples of how to adapt the practices we share to a variety of environments. Authors provided one article per month for two years until the program ended due to lack of funding. In spite of that, these writers continue to provide content to **On Pasture**.



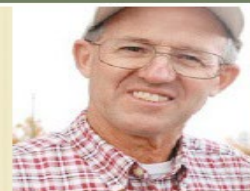
Don Ashford, Ethel, LA has 60 yrs experience in Dairy and with Management-intensive Grazing.



Troy Bishopp, Deansboro, NY created the free grazing charts we update and share with readers annually.



Meg Grzeskiewicz is a start-up grazer building her business on leased land and custom grazing



Greg Judy, Missouri, is a nationally known farmer and speaker interested in helping others be successful.



John Marble, Oregon, runs a seasonal grass business and is focused on the economics of grazing.

Accomplishing Objectives

Over the course of the grant period, ***On Pasture*** staff used the methods described:

1. Provide 30,000 underserved and new and beginning farmers and ranchers with information they can use to be sustainable and profitable.

We know from annual surveys that one-third of our ***On Pasture*** readers have less than ten years of experience in agriculture and are considered to be new and beginning. Another third have 11 to 20 years of experience and the final third have more than 20 years of experience.

That means that by our final year of the grant we were reaching approximately 36,000 new and beginning farmers. From our surveys we found they appreciate plain- language science that helps them understand the natural processes they are working with and the practical information on fencing, grazing plans, forage and soil health as well as the resources, such as NRCS programs, that can help them.

- Reader Comment

On Pasture is the grazing resource I use most often. I find the web site easy to use and the info easy to access. It aggregates articles from various grazing experts the world over and the files the information in an organized way so I don't have to! I can also post questions and actually get answers. I think ***On Pasture*** lives up to its sub- title (translating research...) and that makes it valuable to me as a beginner trying to learn the art.

2. Strengthen ties between NRCS and ***On Pasture*** readers.

3. Share USDA-Funded Research.

4. Increase Visibility of NRCS Resources.

On Pasture strengthened NRCS/Reader ties and increased the visibility of the agency with readers by publishing a variety of **166 USDA NRCS articles** (an average of 1 per week) about the important services the agency provides. The articles included:

- Success stories of graziers working with NRCS staff provided examples of services the agency could provide.
- Information on NRCS technical and financial assistance, along with application requirements and deadlines.
- Timely grazing information from NRCS State Agronomist/Grazing Specialist Victor Shelton.

We took the opportunity in these and many more articles to promote NRCS as a great resource for both technical and financial assistance. To make it easier for readers to take the next step, we included a link to the NRCS office locator so they could find their local office.

We also focused on sharing USDA funded research results with an emphasis on resources provided by the Agricultural Research Service. As part of this effort we shared NRCS soil health videos created in cooperation with Buz Kloot. These videos were especially popular with readers. In addition to providing readers with information to benefit their operations, we emphasized the good work that USDA, NRCS and ARS were doing on behalf of graziers.

Finally, in our twice yearly fund drives, we thanked the NRCS for it's support of ***On Pasture***, letting readers know that if it weren't for the Conservation Innovation Grant, ***On Pasture*** might not exist.

Over the 36 months of the grant, ***On Pasture*** published 166 NRCS/USDA-related articles, or an average of 1 a week. Did it make a difference? This is harder to quantify. We know that readers altered their management behavior, but we do not have specifics on their interactions with NRCS. We did receive emails from several readers that they were working with NRCS staff. One wrote to say he was participating in the Conservation Stewardship Program because we shared information about it along with the deadlines and links for signing up. Another said that he had gotten EQIP funding for prescribed burns to reduce cedar trees and increase forage and habitat on his ranch.

Supporting the NRCS Mission and Staff



On Pasture's vision of providing information that increases grazer sustainability and profitability aligns perfectly with the mission of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The weekly articles promoted good grazing management to improve soil health, protect water quality, improve wildlife habitat and ensure that graziers can be profitable in the long run.

As an outside voice, we used our credibility to encourage our community to engage in practices that the NRCS has long promoted. Since readers told us that they were actually making changes to their operations based on what they read in **On Pasture**, our work directly supported the NRCS in accomplishing its mission.

We also made sure that information was readily available to NRCS staff. We added about 4,000 NRCS staff to our weekly email list to notify them of the week's new articles and help them keep up as new information came out. We also asked them to share their thoughts on what would be helpful to them both from learning something new and for assisting clients. We added content to our weekly issues based on their responses.

NRCS staff told us **On Pasture** is a valuable resource to them:

Good morning. I really enjoy reading your publication, and forward often to family, friends and colleagues. As an NRCS employee, I am glad to see a Conservation Innovation Grant project providing educational material on the scale and pace that your publication is capable of doing.

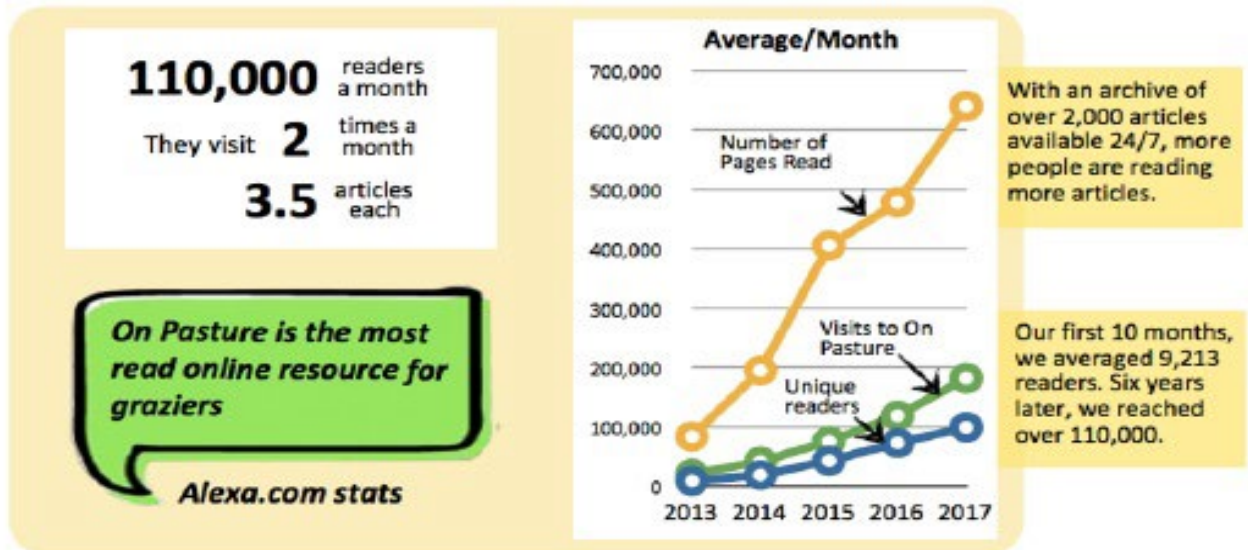
Just want to thank you for the amazing job you do at putting out articles in On Pasture that are SO relevant to graziers and folks that work with them, like me. Of all the newsletters and emails I get (and there are plenty!), On Pasture is the one that makes me stop...I see that week's topics in the email subject line, and I get sucked in every time! Which is a great thing...graziers' experiences and research translated into thoughtful, practical help...what a great combo!

I steer ranchers to On Pasture here in southcentral Montana with the confidence that it's well worth their few spare minutes to look over, to help them do what they do best even better. I'm also glad to see that NRCS is so supportive of On Pasture, and I sure hope that continues. It's making a real difference out here in Grazing Country one article at a time! Thanks again, and keep it coming!

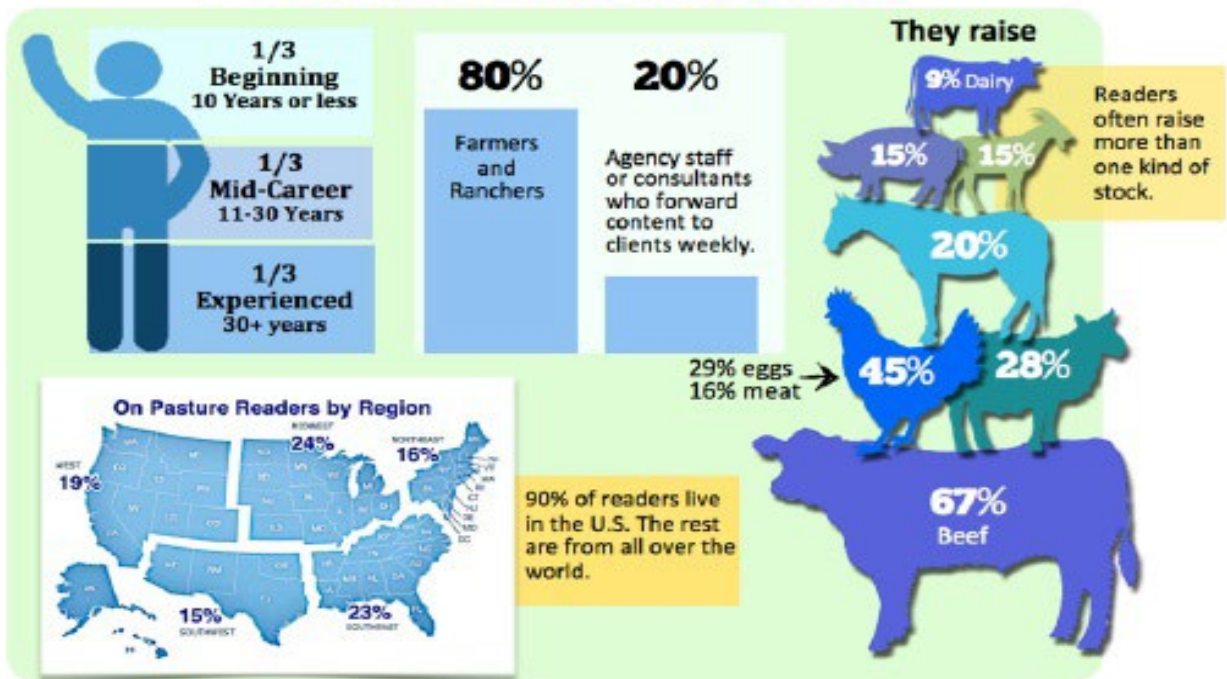
Results

On Pasture in Numbers


Every Spring we asked readers to fill out an online survey - just 10 questions taking 5 minutes. From it, we found out if we were reaching our target audience and what we could do better for our community. Here's what we learned from our surveys and the analytics we gathered from Google, JetPack, and Awstats:



Who Are On Pasture Readers?



Value to NRCS

Articles in the OP Archives	Average Readers per Month - 2019	Total Page Reads With the Grant	CIG Investment	NRCS CIG cost/contact
2,430	107,162	20,927,845	\$390,705	

Results

Conservation Impact, Links, Additional Funding and Output

Conservation Impact

We estimate the conservation impact of **On Pasture** comes from improved management on from 8.36 million acres.

This number is based on our survey results showing that 80% of our 110,000 readers are farmers and ranchers, and that 95% of them have made changes thanks to reading **On Pasture**. The average farm in the U.S. is 400 acres, we chose a conservative 100 acres for purposes of this estimate. Using the average farm size would increase the impact to 33.44 million acres.

Links

On Pasture published 1,145 articles from November 2016 through November 2019. All articles are available 24 hours a day 7 days a week at the website. To look at the NRCS- specific articles use this link: [https:// bit.ly/onpasturenrcs](https://bit.ly/onpasturenrcs)

Please note that **On Pasture** readers must now subscribe to access articles. Contact Kathy Voth for review access for this report.

Additional Funding

The Conservation Innovation Grant made up about 60% of **On Pasture's** operating budget. We are grateful for the generous support of the National Grazing Lands Coalition and the Jena and Michael King Family Foundation, and to readers, advertisers and sponsors who made up difference. This would not have been possible without this combined effort. **Thank you all!**



Radical Center Award

In 2017, Kathy Voth and Rachel Gilker received the Quivira Coalition's Radical Center Award for Research for "remarkable and enduring leadership in the difficult job of working in the radical center, where people come together to explore their common interests rather than argue their differences." Quivira cited **On Pasture** as the best source for scientifically accurate information on pasture- based livestock production for providing up-to-date, accessible and relevant information to pasture-based livestock producers, and for taking to task research that won't hold water, or any story that hasn't got its science right. "Good science plays such a critical roll in the efficacy of and advocacy for resilient soil, healthy livestock, and strong communities — so we would like to say thank you."

Meeting Highlights

2017 - Douglas County, Kentucky and North Dakota Weed and Grazing Workshops, Quivira Coalition Conference, VTGC Conference.

2018 - IFGC and Practical Farmers Conference, SARE Conference, Western Landowners Alliance

Conference, National Grazing Lands Coalition Conference.

2019 - North Carolina Forage and Grassland Council Conference, New Hampshire Granite State Graziers Conference, Plant Herbivore Interactions Training at Noble Foundation.

Output

Articles Published

1,145

That's 32 articles a month, or 6 "How-To" books a year.

USDA NRCS Focused Articles

166

An average of 1 per week.

Readers/Month

110,000

Facebook Followers

18, 463

Social media is an important part of **On Pasture's** outreach. We posted one article a day receiving an average of 3,000 views per day on Facebook. All posts were automatically posted to our Twitter Feed as well.

Participation

Staff participated in at least 3 events per year.

Challenges

The challenges for this project include difficulties building a partnership with the NRCS to expand the reach and impact of the project, grant match obligations, and changes in the kinds of content resources from USDA.

Building a Partnership

NRCS communication policies conflict with CIG goals for the project.

Before applying for this grant, we worked with numerous NRCS staff, sourcing stories and helping them improve their writing skills. We hoped to expand that relationship with this project. By working together, *On Pasture* readers would get great information, NRCS would gain even more visibility, and NRCS staff would enhance their communication skills.

We were directed to work with the public information staff in D.C., to whom we explained our plan and goals. They would not permit us to work with local NRCS staff, and would only participate if they could approve or disapprove any articles. Because *On Pasture* must maintain its independence in order to remain credible to readers, this was not a workable solution, so this plan was abandoned.

As a result, some staff that we had been working with before the grant became concerned about continuing that work. Others we contacted insisted that their names NOT appear on stories because, though they wanted to provide information to NRCS clients, they did not want to appear to be in conflict with the D.C. staff.

Internal NRCS contact management conflicts with the needs of its staff for receiving information.

We had planned to provide access to *On Pasture* for all interested NRCS staff. We were directed to reach out to State Conservationists to get assistance on adding their staffs to our email list. In spite of numerous emails and attempts to work through the system, we never got any response.

We were able to add a number of staff by searching through NRCS directories. Other staff were referred by colleagues and signed up for the email list on their own. ultimately spent over a week going through NRCS staff directories and adding emails to our list. Those who ended up receiving our emails were grateful.

More NRCS staff were discovering *On Pasture* right up to the end of the grant. We would have liked to have served them from the beginning.

Grant Match Obligations

Fund raising requires one full time staff person.

Meeting our funding match meant finding sponsors and advertisers, and running two 2-month-long fund drives every year. Funding constraints meant that *On Pasture* only has one full time staff and one part-time staff. Thus, there was a lot of stress surrounding finding advertisers and working with them, pursuing additional grant opportunities, and asking readers to send in periodic support. Outreach to clients that *On Pasture* provides is a generally under-funded, but critical part of NRCS's mission. Perhaps considerations can be made in the future to reduce match requirements .

Content Resources

The change in administrations reduced the content resources available from NRCS and USDA.

From 2013 through 2016, *On Pasture* content benefitted from the kinds of articles and information released through USDA and NRCS. NRCS materials provided plenty of detailed "how-to" information along with success stories. The ARS AG Research magazine included great reports of research results benefitting graziers that we shared with our readers.

Since 2017, NRCS information is not as rich in the kinds of detail that benefits *On Pasture* readers and is more geared to positive press. We do use some of the Arcview stories.

The ARS Ag Research magazine was replaced with Tellus, and there has not been an article about cattle grazing since 2017. *On Pasture* is now one of the few means to fill that gap. To support our readers we now go directly to the ARS Research Station websites to find out what new research is available for our readers.

Next Steps



The granting world has changed. When Kathy began writing grants two decades ago, it was the norm for 50% of proposals to be funded.

Today that number is down significantly. It's not unusual to spend 160 hours writing a proposal, only to find out 6 months later that only 18-21% of applicants will be funded.

After this grant expired, and **On Pasture** was not selected for additional NRCS funding, we made the move to become a subscription service. Starting in March, 2020, readers could either register to read 3 articles for free each month, or to become a subscriber with access to all articles and bonus content.

Whether **On Pasture** will be successful with this new model is still up in the air. Readership has not dropped significantly, and paying subscriptions are growing. We hope to build a sustainable model, one that can be turned over to a new generation of readers and writers.

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