

Environmental Stewardship Award 2024

Don York

Sandy Hill Farms

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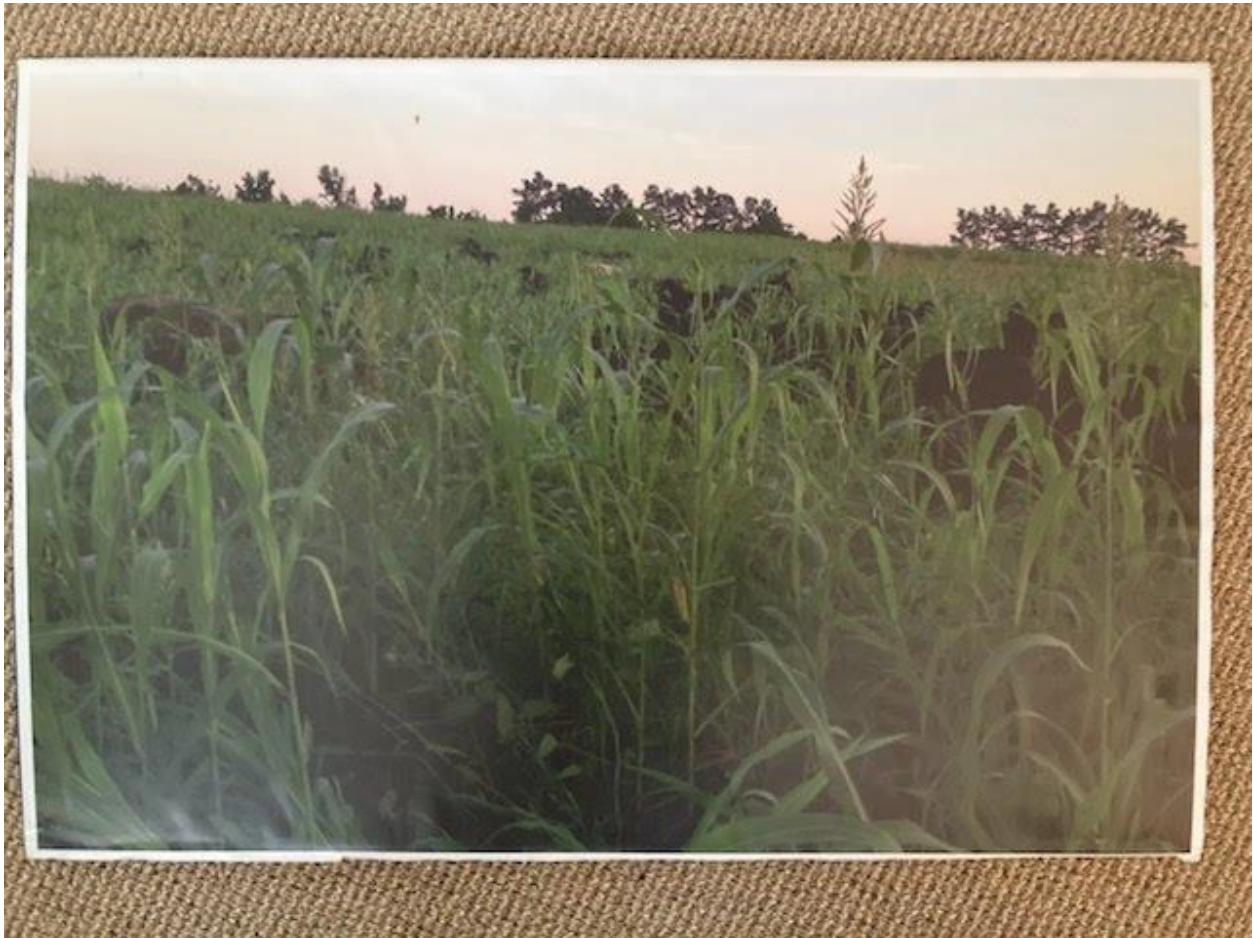
Don- (336) 669-4954

Sandy Hill farms started in 1971 with 10-15 head of cow/calf pairs on about 20 acres of pasture and 50 acres of row crops. Don started expanding the row crops operation and eventually got up to 500-600 acres. In the late 90's Don retired and started working on the farm full-time. Shortly after, the pressures of wildlife and drought cut the row crop operation back to 200-250 acres where it remains to this day. With this cut in row crop production the pasture acreage was increased to around 200 acres and cows increased to around 80 head.



Cows and calves grazing a diverse cool season annual cover crop.

Around 2003 Don worked with NRCS/Soil and Water to implement stream exclusions and watering points to set up around 30 paddocks to implement more rotational grazing. Over the next decade, the farm expanded to around 325 acres of pasture and cow numbers grew to around 100 cows. Around this time dry conditions plagued the area and forced Don to start using more cover crops on his row crop ground as well as annual forages in his pastures to offset the diminishing fescue stands across his farm. Don has been utilizing no-till on his crop ground for over 35 years and cover crops for the last 20 years. Don said that any leftover cover crop seed they used on pastures to supply some annual forages for the cattle to graze.



Cows enjoying a diverse mix of summer annual forages.

About 2014 Don started to get more interested in soil health and regenerative practices in relation to his no-till practices. Transition of conventional fertilizers to biosolids, chicken litter, and waste treatment lime was a big step in reducing their impact on soil health and feeding the soil microbes. To this day they have a low/nonexistent reliance

on commercial fertilizers. Don hosted a tour for the National Soil and Water Conservation Society Annual Conference in 2015 when it was held in Greensboro.



Don York holding a block of soil dug from a high diversity cover crop mix.

Around 2019 Don was approached by Restoration Systems/ Davie Environmental to implement stream mitigation and wetland restoration on his farm in response to the growing highway construction around the farm. Through this program, Don lost about 40 acres of pastures that have been restored into native wetlands. Don says that those areas were low production anyway and through the restoration contract they were able to compensate him enough to replace those 40 acres with 120 acres of productive pasture elsewhere. Don has been unrolling hay since 2000, to distribute nutrients across his pastures more efficiently and reduce heavy use areas.



Utilizing the “Power of One Wire”

This year, Don is participating in a demonstration of the “Bale Grazing” practice, which is an alternative to other hay-feeding systems. This is a labor-saving practice that also provides good distribution of the manure nutrients. Don and his family will be working on this project over the next three years with the Amazing Grazing Program. A Workshop with 36 participants was hosted on the farm on February 6, 2024.



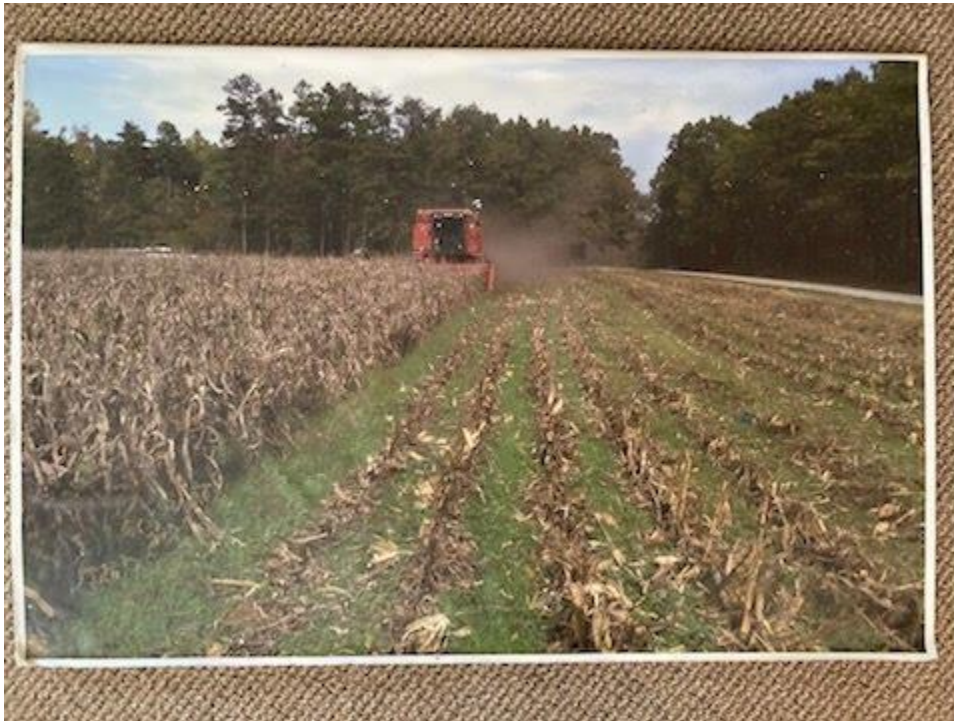
February 6, 2024. Johnny Rogers explains the concept of Bale Grazing to workshop participants at Sandy

The farm is comprised of Enin-type soils on rolling hills. The soil there is highly erodible and shallow. The base forage was initially fescue and Bermuda, however over the years the fescue has dwindled and transitioned more to Bermuda and annual grasses. They have been able to establish some Novel Fescue varieties on hay ground with a heavier soil type where it has persisted.



Bale grazing setup exhibiting 2 ton/acre vs 4 ton/acre

Sandy Hill Farms has worked in cooperation with many conservation agencies including: NRCS, Soil and Water Conservation, FSA, and Restoration Systems.



Corn harvest with cover crop already established.

Don has 2 sons Curtis and Kevin who help on the farm when they are able between working full time and raising kids. Curtis and his daughter Holly are hands-on for the cattle and record keeping. Kevin is the information technologies expert on the farm. Together they work to keep the family farm alive and to preserve the heritage of farming for future generations.

Awards:

Guilford County Conservation family of the year- 1980's

Forage and Grasslands Council members for 20 years

North Carolina Cattlemen's members for 35 years

Past president of Guilford County and Alamance County Cattlemen's Associations