Field Notes

Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture E-Newsletter

E-Field Notes
December 2023

Happy holidays from the Kerr Center!

As always, this year brought a mix of the good and the bad, the old and the new. After last year's challenges with weeds in the elderberries, this year we had the **ideal cover crop** - but mites continued to cause damage. Out in the pasture, last year's story was drought. This year, **rain was sparse but perfectly timed** - but brush is spreading in the pastures.

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We're sticking to our custom of reporting our setbacks along with our successes. The point of a demonstration farm and ranch is to share everything - what works and what doesn't - so that others can avoid some of the same pitfalls in their own enterprises.

If this work is helping you, please consider helping us back! You can **donate to the Kerr Center** as a special holiday gift to us and everyone who benefits from our work. If you've already played Santa, **thank you**!

2022: The Year in Review

Horticulture

Last fall, we didn't plant a cover crop on the elderberry plots - but rye seed left in the soil from previous seasons sprouted, producing one of the **most effective cover crops we've ever had**. It suppressed weeds until June, when we mowed it, and then the resulting mulch continued to keep weeds down through the summer. That limited our weeding work to hand-weeding around the base of each individual elderberry plant.

Our success against weeds didn't extend to insect pests. The plants suffered heavy **mite damage**. We sprayed horticultural oil twice, and plan to spray earlier next year, before the mite numbers can build up to the same extent. Aphids, too, presented a problem, but more minor, and more readily controlled with Safer's soap.

Although this pest pressure prevented some plants from producing a crop, we did harvest berries from each plot, and sent samples to the University of Missouri for analysis.

We held an **elderberry field day** in mid-September. One of the most common comments from visitors was surprise that all the different varieties are in fact elderberries, so different do they appear from one another.

Results so far from the **blueberry variety trial** have been mixed, with several varieties needing to be replanted.

Apart from the elderberry and blueberry trials, we ran another hydroponics trial this year in both the cold frame and the greenhouse, with good results from the greens.

Livestock
This year, the pastures are in excellent condition. Rainfall has been scarce, but what rain has fallen has come at the ideal times.

Under these circumstances, we have been able to **stockpile ample forage**, and hope not to need to feed hay until January. Stockpiling forage, and reducing the amount of hay fed, are long-standing goals.

Hay is expensive and getting more so. The cost of hay equipment (tractors, mowers, rakes, and balers) has also been increasing rapidly. We avoid these costs by having our hay custom baled.

The conception rate for spring-calving cows in 2023 improved significantly over the performance in 2022. Conception rate for first-calf heifers improved from 63% (2022) to 72% (2023).

The conception rate for fall-calving cows won't be known until calving is over this month. Conception rates are generally higher for fall cows, especially for cows less adapted to the warmer summer months, because they are breeding during the cooler months of December and January.

The Beefmaster influence should continue to improve heat tolerance and conception rates. The yearling and first-calf heifers will all be half-bloods for another couple of years, after which we will begin working with three-quarter blood cattle.

"**Rotational grazing** is still our number one management tool," says Cattle Manager Will Lathrop. "It has been accepted by the cattle industry as a sustainable way to manage livestock and grass. We need to continue improving and fine-tuning our grazing system. Nothing is ever perfect."

"I truly believe we have a remarkable beef cattle production system. I have personally observed a remarkable change in cattle performance over the years. Our goal has been to select beef cattle for performance on grass and managing pastures so they meet their nutritional needs. I feel we are getting close to reaching that goal."

Conservation
Our work on pollinator conservation continues - through partnerships with other organizations, outreach, and **pollinator plantings** on the ranch. We've continued to host local youth events, including a **forestry judging contest** and a **portable sawmill workshop**, as part of our **forestry** demonstration projects.

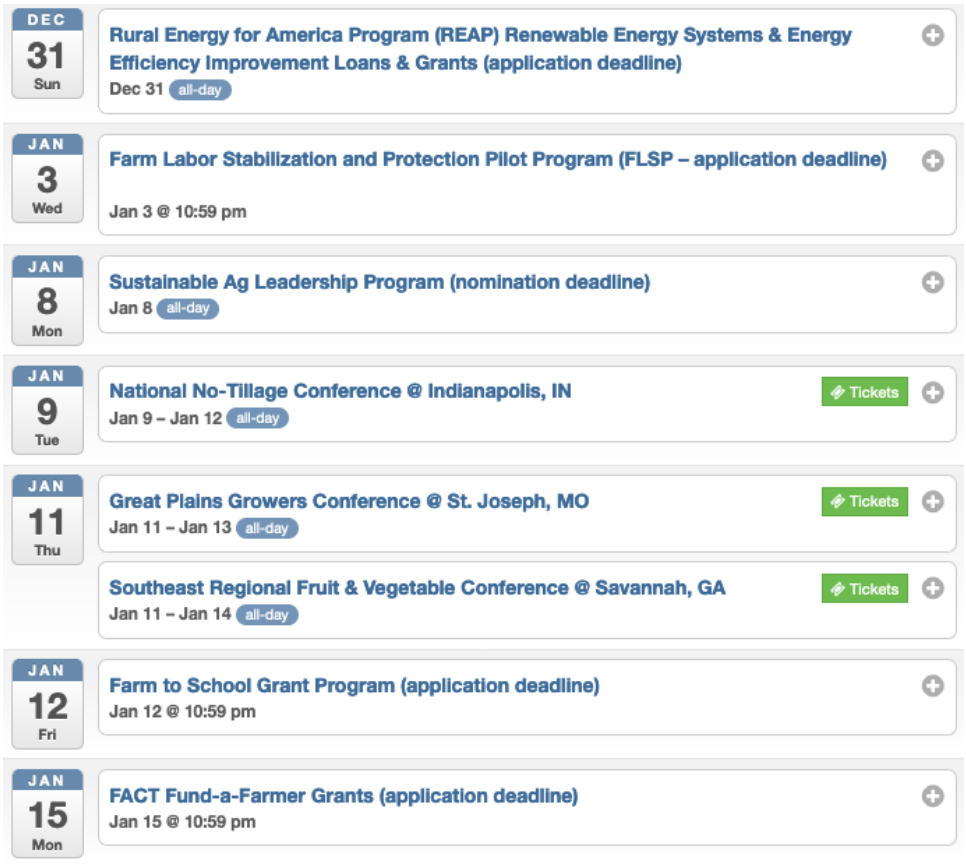
SARE PDP Program
The Kerr Center renewed its role managing the Southern SARE Professional Development Program for another ten years.

2024
Tours will start back up again for the year in April. Stay tuned to our newsletter and website for notices of workshops on livestock, elderberries, and forestry!

Early Winter Events: Sustainable Ag Leadership, Grants, Conferences....

Conference season is in full swing:

- National **No-Tillage** Conference (Jan. 9-12; Indianapolis, IN)
- **Great Plains Growers** Conference (Jan. 11-13; St. Joseph, MO)
- **Southeast Regional Fruit & Vegetable** Conference (Jan. 11-14; Savannah, GA)



Application deadlines are coming up for several grant programs:

- **Rural Energy for America Program** (REAP; Dec. 31)
- **Farm Labor Stabilization and Protection Pilot Program** (FSLP; Jan. 3)
- **Farm to School Grant Program** (Jan. 12)
- **FACT's Fund-a-Farmer Grants** (Jan. 15)

The deadline for nominations to SARE's **Sustainable Agriculture Leadership Program** is January 8.

Full details on these and other sustainable agriculture learning opportunities, as always, can be found on the Kerr Center's online **events calendar**.

Don't forget that you can also use our online calendar to **keep yourself and your friends up to date** on these and other upcoming events, including our tours:
- **Subscribe to our feed** and receive **updates to your personal calendar** as they are made.
- **Share events on the calendar** via a number of **different social media sites**, including Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest.

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