**NCR SARE Research and Education Proposal idea**

**Brokering relationships between livestock producers, non-farming landowners, and beginning farmers**

**Geographic area: Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this project is to foster the establishment of contract grazing as an effective model for livestock production for the eastern North Central Region by encouraging partnerships with non-farming landowners. In many areas, more than 50% of the arable land is owned by non-farming and absentee landowners. This group of landowners may have a range of goals for their land that encompass not only income generation, but also aesthetics, environmental stewardship, or avocation. These acres, some of which are in CRP or other grassland already, may represent a good opportunity for livestock producers to expand their grazing acreage by entering into a partnership with the landowner. This partnership may also provide an opportunity for the producer to bring on a beginning farmer as an intern or apprentice, giving that beginning farmer a means of getting started farming without initial investment in land or livestock. I see this as a win-win-win-win-win. We are giving the landowner more choices on renting their land, providing livestock producers access to more pasture, fostering the next generation of farmers, supporting growth of the grass-fed meat market, and protecting the environment.

**Goals:**

1. Landowners will gain knowledge of ways of generating rental income while achieving environmental

goals by maintaining or establishing grasslands on their property. Non-farming landowners often lack knowledge, access to information, and connections with the agricultural community needed to make informed decisions about managing their land. We know little of the needs and interests of this group even though they manage a large proportion of the farmland in the region.

2. Livestock producers will learn about and consider expanding their operations by doing contract

grazing. Research we did in 2011 suggests that cost of production for beef declines dramatically at herd sizes >50 cows. The average herd size in Wisconsin is 19. One goal of this project is to encourage beef producers to consider expansion to become more profitable and to fill a growing demand for grassfed beef in the region and nationally.

3. Beginning farmers will have the opportunity to get started in farming under the mentorship of

experienced livestock farmers. One of the greatest barriers for beginning farmers is access to land. Another is hands-on experience. This project would provide both.

Potential Partners:

* Green Lands Blue Waters partners
* Southwest Grassland and Stream Conservation Area coalition
* Southwest Badger Resource Conservation and Development
* Wisconsin School for Beginning Dairy and Livestock Farmers
* Land Stewardship Project Farm Beginnings Program
* WI Grass-Fed Beef Coop
* Thousand Hills Cattle Company
* Grassrun Farms
* Wallace Center Pasture Project
* Experienced graziers from Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin who are interested in training/mentoring new farmers
* WI DATCP
* Others?

**Possible Activities**

* Survey of non-farming landowners to determine who they are, demographics, goals, information needs, types of land available, etc. Iowa State did a survey like this a few years ago.
* Regional contract grazing conference. Bring in speakers from Great Plains region where contract grazing is more common. Target producers already doing contract grazing in our three states as well as others who are interested in getting into it.
* Workshops in each state. For our grazing broker project we did a workshop series: one landowner workshop, a livestock producer workshop, then a meet-and-greet workshop bringing the two groups together.
* Distribute existing fact sheets on contract grazing and create additional ones as needed.
* Develop a landowner information packet.
* Work with beginning farmer training programs and experienced livestock producers/mentors to explore internship/apprenticeship models.
* Establish one or more model partnerships in each state. We could possibly use some of the grant funds to pay the beginning farmers and the mentor farmers to establish and manage a grazing system on a non-farmer’s property.