

## **Buchert family wins Lyon SWCD Conservation Farmer award**

Gary Buchert has often found that what's good for his farm and his cattle operation is also good for the environment.

The Lyon Soil and Water Conservation District awarded Buchert and his family its Conservation Farmer award for 2007. The yearly award is presented to one Lyon County farm operation that demonstrates an outstanding record of soil and water conservation practices.

The Buchert family farms in Lyons Township near Russell. They have five generations of Lyon County farming history, one that started with Gary's great-grandparents in 1898. It continues as a family farm operation that has included Gary, his wife Colleen, and their five sons; Shannon, Chad, Shawn, Dustin and Colby. Their son Colby plans to continue the farm operation after his parents retire.

Gary and Colleen began to raise their first cows in 1974 on the farm site that belonged to his great-grandparents. At the time, one of the site's most definite enhancement possibilities involved a conservation idea. Many of the trees needed to be replaced in order to better protect the yard from wind and wind chills. A solution was to construct a shelterbelt of trees on the northwest side, which was completed in the early 1980s. It serves their home and farm yard as well as the livestock facility.

"When we started the best tree protection we had were a few boxelders by the house," Gary said. "It could get hard dealing with the weather in those days."

The shelterbelt is one of several conservation methods that have been used effectively at the Buchert farm. They also practice reduced tillage, have created more environmentally efficient drainage through a filter strip between the cattle yard and an adjacent field, have completed a detailed manure management plan with help from conservation agencies, and have contributed to a shoreland stabilization tradition at nearby Rock Lake next to Lyon County Road 60. Rocks from nearby farm fields, together with gravel installed by Lyon County, have helped to guarantee a protected shoreline along with adequate roadside parking for people who drive to the lake to fish.

The farm's most recent conservation technique is rotational grazing, which has been advocated by Lyon SWCD and other conservation agencies as a way to manage valuable pastures. Under a rotational system, livestock moves from one pasture section to another in a planned pattern. All sections are moderately grazed, but never overgrazed to the point that they would lose their grass stand and become susceptible to erosion damage. Buchert uses a rotational system of eight paddocks with a lane in the center and water in each paddock. Staff from SWCD and the Natural Resources Conservation Service helped in the evaluation of different fence and pasture configurations.

Buchert said the rotational plan fits in well with his cattle operation. He has 45 out of 125 stock cows on rotational grazing. The length of time for rotational pastures to be used is influenced by weather conditions. In 2007, dry summer weather resulted in a need to move the cattle to their yard in mid-July to avoid pasture damage from combined dry conditions and grazing. The rotational area can be used during the spring and summer without interruption in years with more normal rainfall.

"It's something we felt we should add," Buchert said. "It seemed more economical. We could run more cows and not exhaust the pasture, so we get more value from our grass. It's also been favorable for our herd. Many of our bigger calves came from the rotational area. Another advantage is that it doesn't take all that much labor because we have a very practical system. We can just open one of the gates and the cattle will move."

Rotational grazing is part of a long term growth process in Buchert's farm operation. Since the 1970s, he has increased the total number of stock cows from 50 to 125. He usually purchases about 350 more as feeder calves. He farms 750 acres including 90 that are used for alfalfa. All the alfalfa and corn are normally fed to the cattle herd. Another valuable resource has been artificial breeding. A large majority of the cross-bred cattle are now artificially bred. In recent years, Colby has taken responsibility for the herd's breeding program.

When efficient weaning and carefully planned nutrition are added to the equation, it has allowed for continuous improvement. Buchert said he recently reached a longstanding goal to have 80 percent of his calves weight at least 1,000 pounds at a year old. All the while, he has worked toward continuous environmental improvements while he develops the herd.

“I’m happy to see Gary and his family get recognized for what they’ve done,” said Lyon County NRCS District Conservationist Jamie Thomazin. “The rotational grazing is a good example of the approach he takes with his operation. He’s a great example of someone who successfully balances the need for profitability with management of resources.”