

# Holistic Management

Rappahannock farmers see big returns from embracing sustainable principles.

Walter Nicholls  
Photos by Molly McDonald Peterson



**W**ith more than 50 years of experience as a cattle farmer in Rappahannock County, Va., Dick McNear thought he knew just about all there was to know about raising a steer for market. But 18 months ago, for the first time, McNear changed how he grazes his hundred head of cattle. He cuts less hay, saves money on fuel and machinery, and makes more profit. He is increasing the size of his herd. And his 400 acres of pasture have never looked better.

McNear is a convert to the whole-farm planning programs of Holistic Management International (HMI), a non-profit organization based in Albuquerque, N.M., which trains farmers to make better decisions, set business goals, and become better stewards of the land. Last year—and reluctantly at first—McNear was part of a 12-month



DICK MCNEAR HAS TRANSFORMED HIS FARM IN GID BROWN HOLLOW.



MCNEAR'S CATTLE FEAST ON FRESH PASTURE ALMOST YEAR-ROUND.

test group of seven county farmers who participated in HMI's Future Farms & Ranches program. Through classroom sessions, study groups, and field walks, the farmers embraced HMI's concepts for biological, financial, and land planning.

"I was their biggest skeptic. I didn't think it made a whole lot of sense. Now, I'm so impressed," says McNear on a tour of his deep-green, grassy fields in Gid Brown Hollow. "I look around the county and I see a lot of people not managing for sustainability and not maximizing what that acreage will hold."

No two farm operations or farmers have identical needs and aspirations, so HMI provides a variety of long and short-term educational and consulting services with the aim of

moving hidebound farmers into the future. The farmers include those who raise flowers, native plants, specialty vegetables, meat, and eggs from pastured poultry. All strive to improve their land, preserve water resources, and make farming more viable.

"We ask farmers to step back and look at what they're doing. What do I want for my family, my operation, and my life?" says HMI's Chief Operations Officer Tracy Favre. "People are reluctant to try something new. We help them overcome their own perceptions of how you do something." Her team's holistic approach, incorporating "tools" such as grazing management, is in use on more than 40 million acres on four continents. More than 10,000 people have trained with HMI.

For McNear, a chief goal is preserving and improving his land for his children and future generations. In prior years, he kept his 100 cows segregated into three herds and moved them from pasture to pasture when the grass was depleted, just as his father had. HMI's "mob grazing" model showed him the advantages of bringing all cattle together in one herd. He moves the entire group—up to three times a day—into a different fenced field which has had 90 days to recover from the last feeding.

"By not grazing to less than three inches, the root structure and system of the grass are much stronger and the land is less susceptible to dry spells," he says. He used to start feeding his cattle hay in November; now he can wait



HMI'S WORKSHOPS ARE CONDUCTED IN BOTH FIELD AND CLASSROOM.

well into February. He cuts half as much hay as he did before and cut his fuel bill by a third. “My pastures have improved significantly. We are able to (sustain) 50 to 60 more cows, and with cattle prices up this year, I’ll show a good profit.”

In nearby Sperryville at Mount Vernon Farm, owner Cliff Miller has also “gone mob” and extended his grazing season. That allowed him to sell his hay equipment and fence in two former hay fields for permanent pasture. And HMI reinforced the benefits of grazing additional species—chickens, sheep, and pigs—on land not suitable for cattle for optimum use of his acres.

Grazing multiple species on the same land mimics how wild herds of animals move through an area and allow the land to recover behind them. Each eats different things and deposits its own nitrogen-rich droppings. Further microbial processing breaks parasite cycles, which results in fewer, if any, vet bills for worming and vaccinations on HMI-trained farms that use multi-species grazing.

“From handling animals, to looking at business management, to how you live your life, (HMI) teaches you to look at everything and pay more attention to what you are doing,” says Mike Biniek, co-owner of 138-acre Belle Meade farm, also in Sperryville.

Through their association with HMI, these farmers have built a support system in their community that’s at the ready with advice on everything from maintaining financial records to keeping pasture healthy, with eyes on the future.



MIKE BINIEK OF BELLE MEADE FARM USES HMI METHODS.

“There is concrete evidence that it works,” says Miller, adding that there is more to the practice than just raising cattle on pasture. “You must be a businessman, too.” ◆

## Holistic Management International

[www.holisticmanagement.org](http://www.holisticmanagement.org)

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