

Virginia CSP Champions

Keeping Conservation in the Family



Veteran farmer carries on stewardship legacy

Though he grew up on his family's hilltop farm, William Godsey pursued a different career path for much of his early life. The 63-year-old left home in 1975 to serve as a flight mechanic in the U.S. Air Force's Air Training Command and then sold computers for a number of years. Yet, his ties to the land remained strong and his thoughts were never too far from the 160-acre property in Nickelsville, Va.

You could say that stewardship is in his DNA. Godsey's father, Edwin, was chairman of the Scott County Soil & Water Conservation District and instilled a commitment to protecting natural resources that was a guiding factor when William and his brother Tommy took over as full-time operators.

"After I got back from the service, I would come back to the farm on the weekends and Daddy would be telling me, 'They got this program to do this and that program to do that,'" Godsey said. "I was interested but just didn't know how to pursue that."

The property had been a working dairy with sidelines selling eggs and wool. The brothers now wanted to establish a cattle operation and reached out to USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to develop a conservation plan to help them achieve their goals.

Former Gate City District Conservationist Buddy Gilmer walked the land with the Godseys to discover what was needed to transform it.



William Godsey (left) and Gate City District Conservationist Mark Jessee check on his watering trough, which was retrofitted for wildlife escape with NRCS assistance. (Photos by John Markon)

"This place was quite a sight," William said while enjoying the view from the farmhouse's front-porch swing. "There were no fences, just open pastures. The cows would wander down the hill in the morning and come back up every night just as they pleased."

"We had this one pond behind the barn here where the cattle would go to drink. They'd get in that pond and stand for hours. As a result, we'd have lame cows and it was just a nasty environment. We implemented this rotational grazing and, within the first year, you could notice the difference. It had quite an impact on the farm."

Much of the makeover has been accomplished through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). The Godseys' needs and goals aligned well with available CSP enhancements and their status as beginning farmers enabled them to recoup as much as 90 percent of their investment in practices such as non-chemical brush removal, new feeding stations and the extra fencing required for managed grazing.

"The new ideas really attracted me to the Conservation Stewardship Program," said Godsey. "In the computer business, I was always training and learning different things to keep up with the current market. With the CSP, I quickly found you've

got extremely smart people implementing ideas with data behind them.”

“Those ideas have been tested on different farms. I may not have heard about them when they were introduced, but I quickly learned that those practices are modern and productive, which makes me profitable.”

Today, the brothers own or lease three farms and use all their properties to raise beef cattle and grow hay. Godsey uses only 70 of the 160 acres as pasture for a herd of around 115.

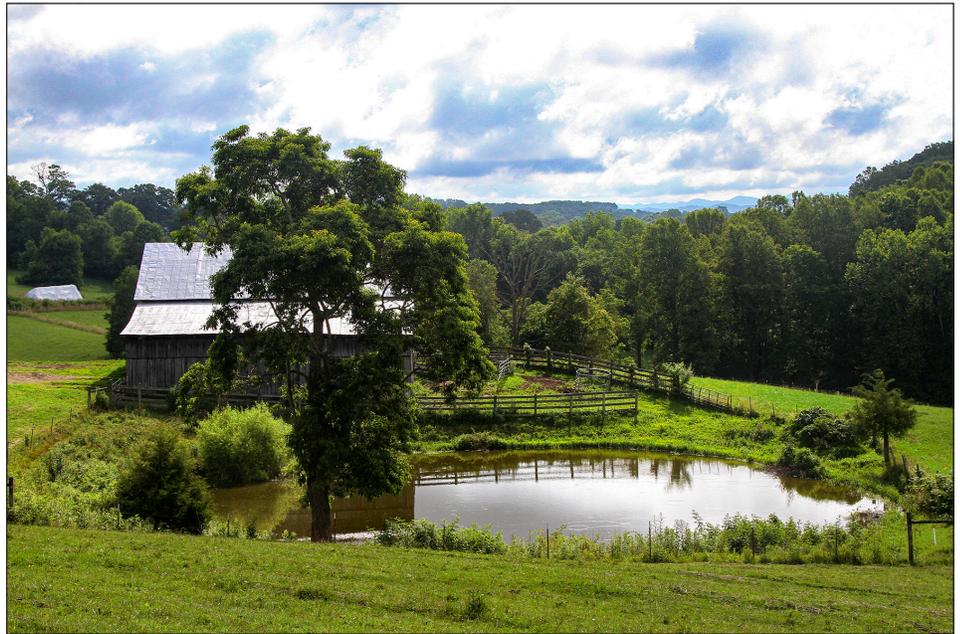
He’s also on his way to what some may have considered the impossible goal of grazing his cattle 365 days a year, allowing him to increase profits by selling his hay rather than feeding it to his livestock.

In his early years operating the farm, Godsey would usually need to begin hay feeding sometime in November. Last year, he made it to Feb. 12 before hay was required. He’s also been pleased with how eagerly the cattle adapt to rotational grazing.

“Humans like sweets, and cattle like the freshest, sweetest grass,” he said. “When you confine them to smaller pastures, they move from one to the next as soon as they can, and they drop their manure everywhere – which is exactly what you want.”

“This is a mountain area and we don’t usually have short or mild winters,” adds current Gate City DC Mark Jessee. “I’m sure a lot of people thought the idea of all-year grazing was totally impractical. William, though, is just the type of producer who’ll find a way to get it done.”

Godsey also shares his experiences with others through his participation in several formal and informal organizations linking



The Godsey family farm in Nickelsville, Va., boasts spectacular hilltop views (above) and healthy pastures through good grazing management (below). In the bottom photo, cattle wait behind a temporary fence to rotate into fresh pastures.

current producers and vets with ambitions to become farmers. One of these groups, the Farmer Veteran Coalition, is a national nonprofit founded specifically to ease veterans’ transitions into farm ownership or careers in agriculture.

Veterans of the U.S. Armed Services can also receive preference for NRCS programs offered in the 2018 Farm Bill and benefit from higher payment rates.

“They’re willing to help and I’d take advantage of it,” Godsey said. “There’s more veterans out there who truly need that assistance – the ones who had traumatic experience in war. We need to help those people as much as we can.”

