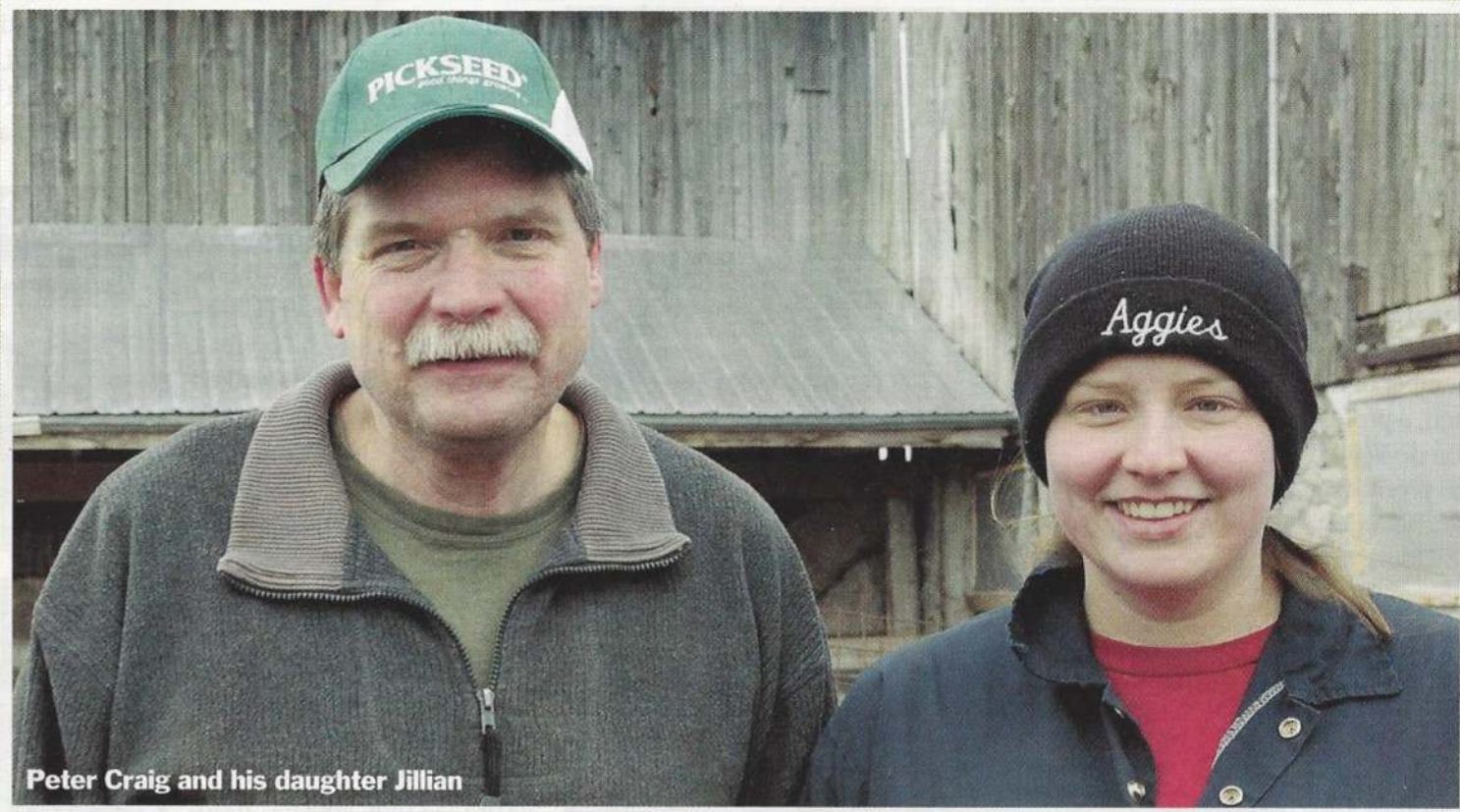


Environmental cost-share supports rotational grazing project



Peter Craig and his daughter Jillian

The Craigs, along with their daughter Jillian, manage a 250-ewe sheep operation

BY NANCY TILT

Ontario Soil & Crop Improvement

Just north of Fenelon Falls there are 160 acres of rolling land; more than 100 acres are pasture and hayfields, the rest a network of creeks, wetlands and woods. The land had been in Janice Craig's family until several decades ago, and about 12 years ago, she and her husband Peter bought it, bringing it back into the family. This is a story of stewardship, not only of family roots, but also of the land.

The Craigs, along with their daughter Jillian, manage a 250-ewe sheep operation. Peter and Janice tend a commercial Rideau-Arcott x Dorset flock. Jillian manages purebred Rideau-Arcott and Dorset sheep.

The Craigs completed the Third Edition Canada-Ontario Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) in 2012. "All farmers are stewards and want to do the best for their land," says Craig. "The EFP process really raises awareness of environmental issues surrounding farming. It gave us the chance to better know our issues and learn how to deal with them."

Completing a peer-reviewed EFP makes a farmer eligible for a number of cost-share programs. Craig notes, "Cost-share opportunities help with projects that we'd like to do as good stewards, but might not be able to do otherwise."

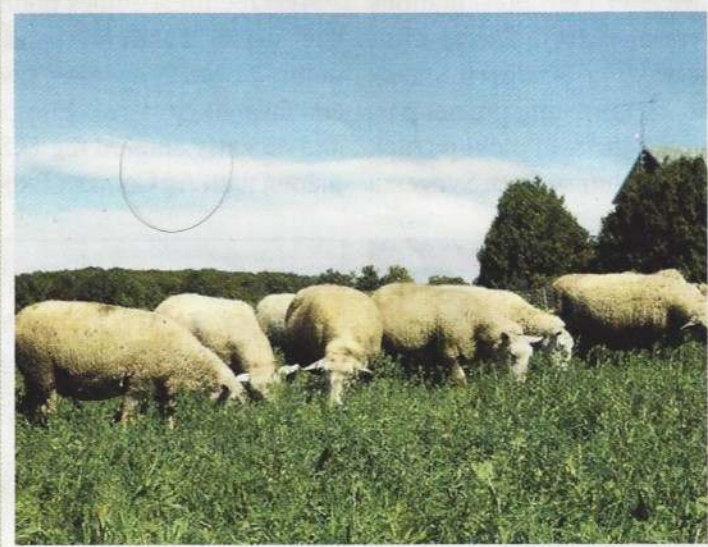
One example was the Species at Risk Farm Incentive Program (SARFIP). It encouraged

beneficial management practices that enhance soil and water conservation while also contributing to healthy and diverse wildlife habitat.

Overgrazing of their pasture land had been an ongoing concern to the Craigs. Healthy pasture reduces the risk of soil erosion from run-off and wind. Overwintering pasture plants trap snow, insulate the ground and increase water availability.

sites in the alleyways which occur when sheep travel back and forth to the barn for water. It's healthier for the sheep and the manure stays on the pasture."

The Craigs divided their 45 acres of pasture into 24 paddocks of about 2 acres each using permanent 4-strand and 5-strand electric fence. When on grass, the flock is moved to a fresh paddock each day, allowing 22-25 days rest on



Pasture turnips and forage rape offer other opportunities for grazing as part of pasture rejuvenation.

To improve their pasture management, the Craigs decided to set up a rotational grazing system. Through SARFIP, they received cost-share funding for cross-fencing to establish smaller paddocks within their existing pasture. Fifty per cent of eligible costs were covered up to \$2.45/metre regardless of fence design.

To support rotational grazing they also needed an alternate watering system, another eligible project through SARFIP. "We needed water close to the paddocks rather than back at the barn," Jillian explains. "This reduces the build-up of para-

each paddock between grazing.

They planted the paddocks with a grass mix of orchard grass, rye grass, tall fescue, Kentucky Bluegrass and white clover. To control weed species, the paddocks are clipped and fertilized with nitrogen fertilizer in late May or early June before seed setting.

The alternate watering system is a network of flexible hose laid out on the ground to each paddock with a quick-coupling system. This allows for the connection of a portable water trough that is accessible to each paddock when the flock

is in it. They designed the paddock layout to minimize the number of times the water trough needs to be moved. Rotational grazing offers numerous benefits beyond giving forage plants sufficient time to recover between grazing. Better quality pasture leads to better weight gains in the sheep and improved herd health.

As well, explains Jillian, "The greater number of paddocks offers greater flexibility in managing the flock. We prefer accelerated lambing and now have options for lambing ewes on grass. We can also use different management practices for portions of the flock as required."

Rotational grazing can also benefit grassland birds. Pastures function as grassland ecosystems in Ontario and are particularly important as nesting habitat for grassland birds, which are declining both locally and globally due to a variety of factors. Rotational grazing offers flexibility in leaving some grass ungrazed until nesting grassland birds have fledged their young.

To provide an alternate forage resource and allow time for the pasture paddocks to rejuvenate, the Craigs plant a later maturing corn and use the crop for grazing. They plant in May, start grazing in August when the corn kernels are still milky, and continue through December. To encourage the sheep to fully utilize the corn, the paddocks are further divided into strips with Electronet temporary fencing. Since sheep prefer cobs, they are forced to eat leaves and stalks before being moved to the next strip.

Pasture turnips and forage

rape offer other opportunities for grazing as part of pasture rejuvenation.

Through another cost-share program, the Craigs had previously completed a separate fencing project to restrict sheep access from both the creek and adjacent natural areas on the property. "By using predator-resistant fencing," says Craig, "we were also able to protect the flock from potential coyote predation. This fencing also provided an outer perimeter for part of our rotational grazing."

"Our land has a lot of diversity," says Craig. "The creeks, wetlands and wooded areas provide habitat for wildlife. The pasture and hayfields allow us the opportunity to produce sheep and manage the land to support them. By protecting the natural areas to function on their own for the benefits they provide and managing the productive land responsibly, we provide better stewardship to the whole property."

SARFIP was funded by the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) through the Species at Risk Stewardship Fund and the Government of Canada through the Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk. SARFIP was linked to the Canada-Ontario EFP and supported by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food through Growing Forward.

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