

We started this farm 18 years ago, but we didn't really get into focused soil health until probably about five years ago. This is Mitch Walker and his beautiful bride, Michelle, out at Blue Slate Ranch in Newport, Washington. We're priding ourselves on trying to become a good regenerative farming operation with health being kind of the center part of that whole operation. And we raise cows, pigs, horses, chickens, turkeys, and a lot of wild game on the property. We've been bale grazing here for 10 or better years just because that's how we feed every winter, right? We have always taken round bales and placed them around pastures and just moved them through when we moved the cattle through, so we were making sure that the entire pasture got grazed and got the benefits.

Grew a lot of weeds and not a lot of good grass and we needed to get that paradigm changed around to where we could grow some good pastures to graze our cattle. We'd much rather spend the money in bale grazing and getting good pasture than we would to spend it in straight hay. A lot of benefits to us for doing that, so that was the main thing was to get soil moisture holding capacity up to carry a lot more poundage of grass. We're probably looking at about 25 to 30 percent wastage is what we're kind of guessing and what we're kind of targeting. I don't want to get it really any less and I really don't want to get a whole lot more.

We've certainly seen the results of not doing enough of it and that's just kind of been a sweet spot from what we've seen. I'm sure it's different for different properties but for us 30 percent is probably about our or sweet spot. The biggest challenge, at least from my perspective, was just getting over the mindset of wasting your feed and how much waste you were leaving on the ground. That first couple of years was a little of a guess, but once we started seeing the benefits, and it's fairly significant benefits that we've seen here, the pastures that we've intensively bale grazed are producing two to three times the forage that the ones that we haven't. So that easily makes the math pencil out. Our weed problem, after the first two years, almost evaporated.

Now it still comes back a little bit here and there. But that was a big surprise to me. But we've also seen improvement in just the soil. The microbes, we see a lot more worms and so forth growing in our soil. So I think it's a mixture of all those, probably a whole bunch more. Yeah, these pastures were all knapweed. There was no grass. It was just a field of knapweed. And we've seen too in the drought years that the pasture that had the bale grazing on it stayed green longer because it had more organic matter in the soil. Because these are thin forestry soils, so they need a lot of organic matter. And that was a big thing when we had the drought a couple years ago that you could see the bale grazing one had green grass and the one we're standing here was brown.

So that was a huge change. If you're growing livestock and you're looking for pasture to forage, it's really kind of a no-brainer in my opinion. If you've got the patience, you've got to have patience. You've got to have some faith that it's going to pay off down the road. But I think that patience and faith will be more than paid for and more than worth it long term.