AMERICAN FORAGE & GRASSLAND COUNCIL

SEPTEMBER 2025

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SCAN ME

This issue:

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

BY ALAN FRANZLUEBBERS
AFGC 2025 PRESIDENT

What's your role in the American Forage and Grassland Council? Are you an educator? Are you a student? Are you an investigator? Are you supplying biological and technical resources or information to end-users? Are you an advocate for sound management? Maybe you play one, several, or all these roles, and the more the better. The AFGC needs all types of people to be an effective organization that can work together to attain its vision – to be the leader and voice of economically and environmentally sound forage-focused agriculture.

Having grown up in the native prairie region of Nebraska in the central Great Plains, studied in the southern-most section of this region in Texas, conducted research in the northern-most section of this region in Alberta Canada, and now studying soils under forages and grasslands in the southeastern US, I have been inspired by the grass-roots actions of American agriculturists around the country. The technical processes of soil are most intriguing to me, and particularly the biological activity associated with the fine-root systems of grasslands, whether used as pasture for grazing livestock, as fodder for bedding and feeding on small farms, as green manure for nourishing the soil microbial community, as ground cover to stabilize steep and undulating landscapes susceptible to erosion, as cover crops that are integrated with grain, fiber, and vegetable crops, or as manicured turfgrass that keeps our yards neat and tidy. Indeed, in my research efforts, I've learned to appreciate how forages and grasslands provide a network of roots that secrete carbon into the soil to keep soil aggregates firm, that redistribute nutrients so that plant communities can be more functionally relevant, that stimulate a diversity of soil organisms to supercharge life at the skin of the planet, and that keep communities working together.

Do we need more functionally relevant grasslands? Absolutely, and I also believe that we can make more effective use of grasslands to achieve both environmental quality and high production that will be demanded by a growing human population. We should work to integrate grasslands effectively into rotations with grain and vegetable crops because soils respond so favorably to grass roots enmeshing its particles to extract water and nutrients, and to deposit photosynthetically derived carbon into the soil. Every week of available sunshine, good moisture, and above-freezing temperature deserves to be captured with the growth of annual and perennial forages, whether they be grasses, broadleaves, or legumes. There is so much more we can do together to solve the global issues of food security, environmental quality, and sustainable landscapes when we think individually and act collectively, and particularly in a reasonable and scientifically defensible manner. The American Forage and Grassland Council provides us many opportunities to learn, educate, and explore important technical, economic, and sociological aspects of agriculture and the environment. Join me in our mission to bring producers, educators, scientists, and industry together to promote and advance forages in agriculture.

Ohio Forage & Grassland Council Levi Morrow

BY JASON HARTSHUH, AFGC BOARD MEMBER

Levi Morrow along with his wife Krysti own and operate Rocky Knob Farms in McConnelsville, Ohio. After Levi and Krysti finished their bachelor degrees from The Ohio State University, they quickly set their sites on growing a farm operation which would support their family, serve their community, and above all honor God with the stewardship of his resources.

While the mission has not changed much, the path they have used to get there has been a winding road. Along the way they have experimented with beef cattle, vegetables, strawberries, pumpkins, agritourism, direct to consumer meat, and sheep. Now a days the dust has settled a bit and they have two main enterprises, pumpkins, and sheep. The pumpkins are primarily sold through a self-serve stand in their driveway as well as some bulk orders for community and school events.

The mainstay of the operation is their commercial hair sheep flock of 500 ewes. McConnelsville is nestled in the foothills of the Appalachian mountains where after forestry and timber, forages are the most abundant resource. They operate primarily on leased pasture ground which is comprised of a mix of cool season forages like tall fescue, orchard grass, timothy, and red and white clover. The base of these forages is tall fescue; while it provides its challenges in the summer months it has tremendous benefits in the fall/winter months as stockpiled forage.

Practices that have helped lead to their success are low inputs, adapted genetics, rotational grazing, and stockpiled winter forages. Focusing on being a low input (mainly low overheads) producer and finding genetics (plant and animal) that match their environment have helped to reduce capital requirements in starting the operation. They have found by rotating paddocks every 2-3 days and allowing a minimum 45 days of rest is not only good for grass production but also helps break the parasite cycle for the sheep. They have also found that the ratio of grazing days to fed feed days is critical to profitability and strive to graze 320+ days a year.

Thanks to AFGC, through their education and networking opportunities, the Morrow's have been able to experiment this year with summer annuals as a part of their grazing system. Levi would not have tried this without the support of research and mentorship from AFGC members across the country. When planting it he thought it was expensive and taking time he did not have but as we are grazing it in August - while fescue is starting to stockpile - he thinks it is the best thing ever. There is abundant feed that the ewes are eager to eat and is giving the cool season grasses time to rest and recover.

As for the future, Levi and Krysti hope to continue growing their sheep flock to a point where it can support another fulltime employee and would like to continue to look for ways to support their local community. Above all they hope to continue finding opportunities to steward Gods resources.

Indiana Forage Council

The Indiana Forage Council (IFC) is dedicated to research and education for profitable forage production and utilization. IFC was incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in 1966 and is an affiliate member of the American Forage and Grassland Council. IFC is led by an all-volunteer board representing the three areas of producer, industry partner and educational/scientific partners. The board also has a specific board position for a representative from Purdue University. The overall arching goal of IFC is the promotion of forage production, management, utilization and marketing, research into various forage applications in production agriculture, communication of current forage research and results to forage growers.

Forage agriculture in Indiana is present in all 92 counties. Within the state, there are 633,000 acres of pasture, 150,000 acres of corn and alfalfa silage and 530,000 acres of hay production. These acres support the forage needs of beef cattle, dairy cattle, sheep, goats, horses and many bee apiaries, not to mention the wildlife population Indiana's forage base supports and maintains. These forage and livestock operations represent nearly 50,000 operations that have a need for quality forages.

The IFC is dedicated to producer education and each year works as a board to plan educational activities for producers. These events range from grazing schools (held every other year), to the annual meeting and tour (held in different areas of the state to highlight the local forage industry), hosting the regional Heart of America Grazing Conference (every 5 years) to specialized programs to meet an educational need. It is through the dedication and skills of the IFC board that these events are successful in supporting and promoting the Indiana forage base. Besides in person events IFC provides members with a quarterly newsletter highlighting past and upcoming events. One of the most unique portions of the newsletter is the feature article written by a Purdue student highlighting a producer or business with a forage focus. With guidance from the board for topics of interest and financial support for travel expenses, the student works with the State Forage Specialists and Purdue Ag Communications Department to write the 3 to 4 feature articles and in return the student receives college credit.

IFC cannot be a true success working alone and has had strong partners over the years. Purdue Extension is such a partner with local extension educators being a part of the team as IFC events are held throughout the state. These local contacts help connect producers with IFC and help IFC tailor the education and outreach to meet local needs. The Indiana Beef Cattle Association is another strong partner as they assist with event promotion and registration of IFC events.

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Indiana Forage Council

IFC assists the Indiana Beef Cattle Association by providing forage related articles for their magazine and IFC works a volunteer shift at their ribeye food stand at the Indiana State Fair each summer. The forage ag businesses in the state support the endeavors of IFC by hosting meeting locations and providing financial support for many events. The partnership IFC has with AFGC is invaluable. The membership management by AFGC and the ability to pay-on line is a true benefit to the membership of IFC and to our volunteer board that would be tasked with managing membership. One of the greatest values of these partners is the personal relationships that are often built in the planning and execution phases of educational programming and events.

A long-lasting project to highlight is the Toxic Weed Garden at the Southern Indiana Purdue Ag Center (SIPAC). An idea from Dr. Grant Burcham (the Heeke Animal Diagnostic Lab Director) was presented to the IFC board for the establishment of a living garden of plants that are toxic to animals.. Dr Burcham was interested in being able to show producers that may have lost an animal to a toxic issue, what the plant looks like, live and not just a photo in a book. IFC provided the funding for the materials and signage for the garden. Signage at each of the plants includes QR codes to access detailed information regarding the plants, such as growth habits, where the plant is likely to exist on landscapes, toxicity issues, plant reproductive and life cycles, etc. The toxic plant garden is visited by many groups and individuals each year.

A second specific partnership to highlight is the Hoosier Hay Contest that IFC organizes every other year. The goal of the event is to encourage producers to be proactive in testing forages for quality to prevent nutritional challenges during the feeding period. The event is run as a contest where top producers are recognized but the main goal is to get forage testing as a part of routine management on Indiana operations. This event would not be possible without the partnership with Sure Tech Labs, one of the forage testing labs in Indiana. They work with IFC to offer testing to those in the contest at a reduced rate and IFC also supplements the testing expense through IFC funds and other industry support funds. At the conclusion of the event Purdue Extension then reviews the data and walks producers through how to utilize the information. This portion has been done both in person as well as through a zoom meeting format. This multi organization partnership has had great value to Indiana producers.

Who I am...

BY BRANDON SMITH

I grew up in Slocomb, Alabama, on my family's small cow-calf operation, where my earliest experiences with agriculture shaped my lifelong passion for ruminant nutrition and forage systems. My journey in animal science began with the FFA Organization, which inspired me to pursue dual B.S. degrees in Animal Sciences and Agronomy & Soils at Auburn University. From there, I earned my M.S. in Animal Science (Ruminant Nutrition) at the University of Arkansas and my Ph.D. in Agronomy (Forages) at Texas A&M University.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to work with mentors who have profoundly influenced my approach to research and teaching. Edzard van Santen instilled in me a love for statistics and a healthy recognition of my own limitations. Russ Muntifering has always been a steadfast supporter, while Ken Coffey taught me how to achieve research outcomes even with limited resources. Monte Rouquette helped me appreciate the rich history of our field and the shoulders on which we stand.

At Auburn University, I serve as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Animal Sciences, where my research program focuses on improving the sustainability and profitability of pasture-based beef cattle systems in the southeastern United States. My work integrates animal, plant, and soil responses to management practices, with a particular emphasis on understanding the ruminal environment and processes to enhance animal performance, pasture productivity, soil health, and environmental sustainability. I am especially interested in reducing input costs and greenhouse gas emissions through innovative approaches such as targeted supplementation and the use of plant secondary metabolite-producing forages.

My research is designed to address real-world challenges faced by producers. By developing and validating sustainable management strategies, I aim to help beef cattle producers improve profitability, reduce input costs, and enhance environmental stewardship. I am committed to translational research, ensuring that our findings are relevant and applicable to on-farm operations. Though I hold a teaching and research appointment, I maintain an active presence in Extension activities, field days, and producer workshops, and was recently named SARE Coordinator for Auburn University.

Mentoring students is one of the most rewarding aspects of my career. I have had the privilege of advising and training graduate and undergraduate students, helping them develop skills in research, data analysis, and sustainable livestock management. I also teach core courses in animal nutrition and forage production, and strive to incorporate the latest advances in ruminant nutrition and sustainable agriculture into my curriculum.

My motivation as a researcher and educator comes from a personal drive to make an impact. I am often reminded of a quote from a prominent animal scientist: "The only way I am getting a trip to Stockholm is if I buy a ticket." While I know I am not destined for a Nobel Prize, making incremental changes for the betterment of society is enough to keep me going.

Looking ahead, I see my research program taking on a more international focus. I am particularly interested in how tropical conditions and changing weather patterns affect the nutritional ecology of ruminant animals. In recent years, I have visited and established connections in Costa Rica, Colombia, Brazil, Thailand, and Indonesia, and I look forward to expanding these collaborations to address emerging challenges in forage and livestock systems around the world.

I am grateful for the opportunity to serve the forage and grassland community and to contribute to the advancement of sustainable agriculture. Thank you to the AFGC for this recognition and for supporting early-career researchers like myself.

Affiliate Event Information

Oregon Forage and Grassland Council is hosting the Resilient Pasture & Forage Symposium October 2-3, 2025.

For more information visit www.oregonforage.org

Competition Updates

Applications for 2026 Conference Competitions are open!

Forage Bowl: (Deadline 11/14/25)

Emerging Scientist: (Deadline 11/14/25)

Forage Spokesperson: (Deadline 11/14/25)

Photo Contest: (Deadline 12/1/25)

Visit afgc.org under events for entry details.

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