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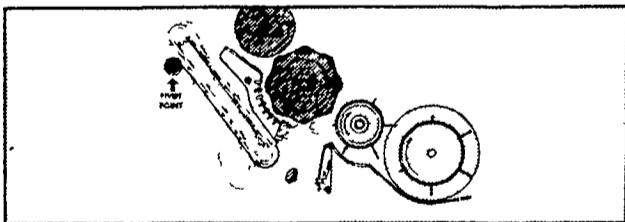
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**FACTS  
FOR  
DAIRYMEN**

by  
**N. Alan Bair**  
Associate  
County  
Agricultural  
Agent



**From Barn to  
Pasture**

Dairymen all over Pennsylvania look forward all winter to these next few weeks when we can get the cows and heifers out on pasture. There are many valid and some questionable reasons for this practice, so give some thought before opening the pasture gate too soon.

On the list of benefits for getting the animals outside as soon as possible would be exercise, sunlight and green grass for vitamins, and probably the biggest incentive to the dairymen—just getting the overcrowded animals out of the barn that is poorly ventilated and desperately needs the manure hauled.

But what about the potential hazards or problems with putting dairy animals on early spring pasture? Your concerns should include sufficient nutrient intake, poisonous plants, and on milking animals also consider milk quality and mastitis control.

Just yesterday I saw a whole herd of cows on new pasture—pasture that was just starting to get green. With a lawnmower and vacuum cleaner I doubt that you could have harvested 100 pounds of dry matter from the entire 20 acres. The point

is, don't expect animals to maintain themselves on such a pasture. You must continue to supplement them with at least some dry hay for young stock and a complete ration for milking animals. Even as pasture becomes more lush don't overlook adequate nutrient intake, including minerals.

A very real danger in early pasturing is the possibility of poisonous plants. Animals don't normally eat these not-too-tasty plants, but given the proper circumstances of hunger and craving for something green can result in real trouble. Some of our most poisonous plants, like the hemlocks, are already several inches high and look inviting to a hungry animal.

Milk quality probably suffers more than anything else during spring pasture season. The grass and garlic off-flavors are real problems. The flavor problems can easily be overcome with well known management practices like removing the strong feed several hours before milking. A reduction in milk quality will probably hit you in the milk check quicker than anything else.

It has been the experience of many dairymen that when they do put the cows on pasture the herd experiences

mastitis flareups. The cause is usually given as cows laying down on cold damp ground. This may compound the problem but the more likely cause is the sudden change in feeding and management and the resulting stress. This is the real key to all of the stated problems and the solution to these problems. Make a gradual change from barn feeding and management to pasture feeding and management.

This gradual change means feeding animals before putting them on pasture, and removing them from the pasture several hours before milking. The

feeding program should gradually change as the pasture becomes more available and the animals become more accustomed to it. Observe new animals on pasture often. Who knows, they may find that hole in the fence you forgot about!

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