



This is a view of the Roudabush farm with three grassed paddocks and sacrifice lot (on right with cow in it).



Three grassed lots on Gary Conner's 170-cow dairy farm in Stuarts Draft, Va. was one of the sites of the recent rotational lot grazing tour in Virginia.

Mill Creek Project Tours Va. Grazing Lots

STUARTS DRAFT, Va. — "Our barnyard was so muddy our kids were getting stuck and we had to go pull them out," was the tongue-in-cheek response of Gary Conner, dairy farmer.

Conner's 170-cow dairy was one of the stops on a recent tour sponsored by the Pequea-Mill Creek Project, a joint extension and SCS water quality project in Lancaster County.

The tour looked at the rotational lot management system on two dairy farms in the central Shenendoah Valley of Virginia. This system was designed to cut down the amount of bare ground around barns. Jerry Swisher jr., extension dairy agent from Augusta County, initiated the concept in 1985 as a water quality best management practice.

The rotational lot system generally involves three small (2-3 acres each) grassed paddocks and a sacrifice lot. The cattle are rotated throughout the three paddocks based on the condition of the sod. This allows time for each paddock to recover for a few weeks before cattle return to it.

The sacrifice lot is a smaller lot which is used about 30 days a year when weather conditions are too wet. The grassed areas are seeded to fescue because fescue is a hardy grass that withstands heavy cattle traffic. In addition, fescue is not a highly palatable grass during the growing season, so cattle are not as likely to overgraze it. Swisher said that the benefit of this system was not to provide grazing for the cattle but rather to provide a grassed exercise area.

The first stop on the tour was the 50-cow dairy owned by Roland and Katy Roudabush. The Roudabushs installed this management system in 1985. Maintenance of the pasture includes occasionally seeding with a no-till drill as well as periodic clipping of the lots. Sacrifice lots are scraped twice a year to prevent buildup of manure and organic matter.

Scraping the earthen lots prevents them becoming the mudholes that used to trap Gary Conner's children when they went to bring the cows in. The primary purpose of this system is not to provide forage. However, some grazing does take place and occasional harvesting may be necessary. In 1990, 340 bales of hay were baled off two of the lots.

The second stop on the tour was at the 170-cow dairy of Gary Conner. The Conner dairy also had a rotational lot management system. This stop gave the group an opportunity to view this management system on a large dairy operation.

This farm utilized about 15 acres of pasture. This setup was similar to the Roudabush farm, just slightly larger. However, in this case the pastures were about 100 yards from the barn. The area between the grassed strips and barn was used as an exercise lot. The grassed lots had excellent grass cover in mid-November, despite the fact that these dairymen put their cows on these lots approximately 325 days a year.

According to Swisher, the benefits of the system for the cows include:

- Cleaner udders (reduced milking time).
- Fewer cases of mastitis and reproductive infections.
- Grassed lots were 8 degrees cooler in summer than bare lots.
- Cleaner-looking pasture and farmstead area.
- Less time needed to get cows up for milking.
- Cows exhibit heat better on grass than on concrete.

The main reason for developing this system was water quality improvement. The Roudabush farm achieved a reduction in soil loss from 72 tons/acre/year on the bare lot to .42 tons/acre/year on the grassed lot. In addition, the grass growth utilizes additional nutrients and prevents them from leaching into groundwater. In Virginia, cost sharing is available for the costs and labor involved in establishing this practice.

Win Phillips, nutrient management specialist with the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation,

explained the tax credit program in Virginia. Virginia provides a state income tax credit of up to \$3,750 for farmers with nutrient management plans who purchase manure spreaders provided the spreaders have a litter pan, top beater, and a drive slow down kit. These features enable farmers to spread poultry manure at rates as low as three tons per acre. To encourage the use of conservation tillage, a tax credit of \$2,500 is available for the purchase of no-till drills and planters.

The final stop on the tour was the Wampler Turkey

farm, where the group received a firsthand look at dead bird composting. This low-cost dead bird disposal system saved this farm nearly \$10,000 per year in energy savings over incineration.

Wampler also had a stacking shed which was used for storage and composting of poultry manure. This stacking shed is one of 120 manure sheds that was cost shared through the Chesapeake Bay Program.

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