

Alternative Farming Practices May Bring Success

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— As throngs of farmers recently mingled with exhibitors or listened to workshop speakers on successful farming practices, a message kept surfacing: No two farms are alike.

What works for one farmer may not work for his neighbor down the road.

The farmers were attending a dairy day, sponsored by the Penn State University Cooperative Extension and area dairy businesses at the Tioga County Fair Grounds. There dairy experts offered a variety of options to consider to make farms more profitable.

"The big ticket items are feed, labor, and debt," said Steve Ford, a farm management specialist from PSU. During his presentation on "What Profitable Dairy Farms Look Like," he distributed a comparison report on the top 25 percent of farms in Pennsylvania in 1991 for financial performance to the average farm.

The report broke down the business of farming into such categories as the vet/medicine expense per cow, purchased feed per cow, crop acres per cow and machinery operating expense per acre.

"But lowering the cost (of an expense) may not be the same thing as increasing profits," explained Ford, "because, maybe the farmer puts more money into crop production to produce better quality forage to reduce the feed costs, that way he makes more money in the long run.

"I don't think farmers should cut costs in feeding or vet care, and if they are already locked into some kind of debt structure that's hard to change."

Ford stressed that the most important thing was for the farmer to first figure out where he stood. No farmer should make any changes at all in their management practices until they know what needs to be changed.

Duane Pysher, an USDA Soil Conservation Service specialist, presented a program on "Pasture Management, How To Make It All Work."

Pysher explained the intensive grazing practice, stressing, too,



Dr. Mark Roberts demonstrates the parts of an udder, one of four udders he brought to the Tioga County Dairy Day.

that how the practice is applied should depend not only on the farmer and what he feels would work best for him, but also on the location of the farm and the weather conditions.

An intensive grazing operation divides the total pasture area into separate paddocks whereby cows are transferred from paddock to paddock according to grass growth for ideal grazing conditions.

This practice utilizes pasture space more efficiently, forcing cows to be less discriminating in their grazing because they are in a limited area where grasses are at an optimum nutrient level, while giving exhausted paddocks a chance to rejuvenate.

Pysher explained that tailoring the program to fit a farmer's needs can be done three ways. The farmer can change the amount of land available, change the number

of livestock per paddock, or change the number of days a paddock is used.

Recognizing stress factors, and taking steps to avoid them are important in a successful intensive grazing operation, according to Pysher.

"Stress factors are anything we can induce, lack of feed, lack of water. Basically, the greatest stress factor in grazing would be heat. If we can overcome that by providing shade at the appropriate time, or by giving them fresh feed or water, they will forget all about that external stress factor."

Shade, however, should not be provided in the form of a tree in the pasture, as Pysher explained. "Cows will seek shade at times when they don't need it. The shade tree becomes the social meeting grounds, and, rather than resting in the middle of the paddock where there's grazing, they will gather underneath the shade tree which prevents the good utilization of the forage, as well as provides problem sites for parasites and other diseases."

Pysher recommended either providing shade in a portable form or in a wood lot which can be open and closed as needed.

The frequency of changing a paddock depends on the situation. Used as a method to reduce the heat factor, paddocks may be changed every half day. On the other hand, it could be as long as three or four days, depending on the growing state of the grasses.

Whatever the frequency, Pysher said, "It is important to have good quality, clean water. Ideally, water should be accessible in every paddock."

In using an intensive grazing program, like any farm management practice, the success rate will also vary from farmer to farmer.

As Pysher explained, an economic study was done on 15 farms converting from a total storage feed system to an intensive grazing program along the Seneca Trail in New York State. The savings realized by these farms varied from 26 cents to \$3.21 per hundred weight of milk produced.

"Some of them increased production, some of them decreased production," said Pysher. "But the bottom line was, there were more dollars in the checkbook at the end of the month from that type of system."

Just as farmers should individualize their management practices to realize the full potential of the farm's profitability, so should they individualize their cows' feeding program, particularly the dry cows.

A "Dry Cow Nutrition" program presented by Jud Heinrichs, PSU dairy specialist, provided tips on how to recognize the changes in a dry cow so that its feeding program can be changed accordingly.

To determine the body condition, look at the tail head and loin area on the cow. "The tail head area changes drastically from a dry cow to a lactating cow," said Heinrichs.

Body condition is determined on a scale between 1 and 5, with 1 being too thin and 5 being too fat. Ideally, a dry cow should be between 3 and 4. Since the body condition changes over her periods of lactations, the farmer needs to be aware of these changes.

A cow losing weight is hard to get bred. If the cows is too thin at the start of her lactation, the farmer only has 60 days to bring her body weight back up or he will lose money. Once the cow fresh-

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