Grass Is Greener On Forgey's Side Of The Fence

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LOGANSPORT, Ind. — As a forage farmer, Dave Forgey always searches for greener grass. About three years ago while reading about New Zealand's grazing practices, he visualized the possibility for greener grass on his 300-acre dairy farm.

Now, Forgey brags that "the grass is definitely greener on our side of the fence."

This discovery has raised his dairy farming profits 400 percent.

Forgey is so excited about his discovery that he has traveled to more than 10 states across the U.S. this year to tell other farmers how they too can have greener grass.

Forgey shared his "secrets" with members of the American Forage and Grassland Council that met this week in Lancaster.

Forgey, who said that he has always been a good forage producer — probably better than a dairyman because I knew plants — classified himself as a conventional dairy farmer until his experiment three years ago.

"Then I took a 180 degree turn and broke my farmland into paddocks that are three to four acres is size and went to seasonal dairying. Forgey's 150 cows graze in those paddocks from late March until December 15.

He lets all his cows dry up before Christmas and then freshen in March and April.

"The cow that freshens in March hits peak production in May and June when they need the most feed. That corresponds with the same growing pattern as acreage," Forgey said.

Because he always kept detailed records, Forgey said that those records showed that it was really tough to make money in dairying during December and January because of the cold weather problems causing equipment breakdowns and animal health problems.

With one easy stroke, Forgey changed that. "If the cows are dry, there aren't problems," he said. "No frozen udders, no equipment breakdowns to deal with in those cold frigid months, no fuel costs, and less time working."

Since the cows graze, Fogery was able to sell his expensive hay baling equipment — the chopper, combine, and corn planter.

Now he needs only a haybine, a round baler and stretch wrap to harvest the excess forage for the small amount he feeds the dry cows when it's too cold for pasturing.

Before the transition to grazing, Fogery said that his herd averaged 20,000 pounds in production. "But the returns for the investment was only 5 percent. Now, after three years of grazing, my returns are 20 percent — that's a 400 percent difference," a jubilant Forgey reported.

He tells fellow farmers, "We must learn to control our costs. Margins are smaller every year and with world markets looming over the dairy end, they can ship in milk at $8 a hundred weight."

After careful analysis, Forgey predicts $10 a hundred weight will be the highest price in the next 10 years.

"If that's true, we must find a cheaper way to produce milk," Forgey said.

The most logical way is to look for lower costs. And to Forgery there is no quicker way to cut costs than to use rotational grazing. He estimates that it cost him less that $20 per acre to put up a one wire high-tensile fence that is electrified and can be moved around.

Fear of change keeps most farmers from making the switch, Forgey said. Some think cows bloat on grazing, but that can be easily controlled by stringing polywire inside the fenced area and moving it two to three times a day.

On a typical day, Forgey said his 150 cows are put into a three-fourth acre of good quality alfalfa grass pasture that is 8- to 10-inches tall. This forces the cattle to graze the area to about three inches. As soon as the 3-inch height is reached — about one hour or less — the polywire is moved, forcing the cows to graze the next three-fourth acre. This keeps the cows from top grazing and from trampling the grass,

Forgey estimates that it takes less than 5 minutes to change the polywire.

Some farmers fear muddy pastures, but Forgey said that is never a problem when rotational grazing is used.

"Because the grass is shorter, younger plants come up and that makes thicker grass, which in turn controls the mud made by cows," he said.

"Many people don't understand the concept and think you can't make it work. But if you understand plants and how they grow, it works," he said.

Dave Forgey reports that his profits increased 400 percent when he switched to seasonal milking and intensive grazing.

On hot days, the breakwires are changed more often, which allows more moisture in the grass where the cows graze.

Before Forgey made the switch, he said that he read tremendously about the research done on New Zealand grazing. One article showed how a small farmer milking only 30 cows could survive financially in 1987.

"That made me realize the concept and the profit potential," Forgey said. "I thought why can't I use this same concept with my 150 cows"?

Studies show that about one acre is needed per cow and its replacement to make grazing work. Although Forgey has only 150 cows on his 300 acres, now that he knows grazing works, he plans to increase his herd size soon.

Forgey had a consultant from Wisconsin help him convert his farm to paddocks and since then Forgey has been on his own.

"It's a big change, and one that a farmer does not get much support from as far as equipment dealers, feed companies, and nutrition consultants," he said.

"It's especially difficult for farmers to make the switch if they are already experiencing financial difficulties, because it is not promoted as a viable option — because so little is known about it."

But Forgey sees that changing. Since he has experienced success with this method, he is in great demand as a speaker at many extension and agricultural meetings.

Forgey, himself, cannot stop talking about the benefits of rotational grazing. He said there is less stress on the soil since it isn't plowed. In early March, Forgey uses a four-wheeler to hand seed an established pasture. He uses about 10 pounds legumes in a hand seeder fastened to the four-wheeler.

There's little need for fertilizing since the cows take care of that while grazing.

Forgey said that he ocassionally stimulates early and late growth in the pasture by adding some nitrogen.

Two full-time employees help Forgey in his dairying operation.

For more information, write Forgey at his River-View Farm R.#6, Box 100, 609 Georgetown Rd., Logansport, IN 46947 or call (219) 652-2461.

A number of out-of-state participants in the AFGC Conference stayed with local host farm families in Lancaster County. Look for a report on their experiences as told to Lou Ann Good in Section B of next week's issue.

NAFTA To Help Reduce

(Continued from Page A21)

GATT on world trade with the movement of a battleship. "Once it's started, it just keeps going," he said, allowing other countries, such as Argentina, Chile, and those on the Pacific Rim, to join in. This could benefit consumers, and agriculture, in a big way.

The markets will thus "respond to consumer supply and demand, rather than political supply and demand," according to Kleckner.

Kleckner spoke about the importance of respecting the role science has in helping to improve the work farmer's work, which goes unappreciated by many who do not understand farming. He cited the efforts of environmentalists to create more pressures on farmers regarding animal care.

"We continually face rules and regulations that are imposed, not to promote better husbandry, but to answer unfounded charges," he said. "It's clear to me that we'll never be able to please some people no matter how well we treat our animals or how well we care for them."

This produces a tremendous impact on those who produce the feed and forage for the animals.

Kleckner said that his farm farrows year-round in farrowing stalls. He said, "I wonder about these folks who are screaming about how animals are confined.

"I'd like them to come up to my farm or some of your farms, for example, when it's 30 degrees below zero or 20 below zero and the wind chill is 50, 60, 70 degrees below zero, and (see) that building is heated and those heat lamps (are on). Would (the pigs) be more comfortable outside in weather like that? I think not."

He said he is bothered by media accounts that portray a farmer that is doing something wrong "and make a big story of how they treat their animals or about some environmental impact that their farm has caused," he said. "You can find those people. And the inference is that that's all of us."

Kleckner also spoke about the severe weather that Midwest farmers have had to endure, and efforts to recover from a debilitating summer of floods and a cold, snowy winter. He said that in parts of northwest Iowa, "it was horrible up there — it was unbelievable." He said the weather was so bad "you feel like crying but you cannot because you're an adult," and humor is the only way some farmers can deal with the situation.

Dean Kleckner, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, spoke to about 200 attendees at the golden anniversary celebration of the founding of the American Forage and Grassland Council at the national conference on Monday at the Host Resort.

Penn State Joins IPM Development Consortium

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Penn State is one of several institutions that will participate in a national consortium led by Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University to develop international integrated pest management (IPM) programs.

The five-year, $7.5 million IPM program is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and will involve countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In many developing countries, crop losses to insects, diseases, weeds and other pests are estimated to be as high as 50 percent. IPM could effectively control these pests while greatly reducing the economic and environmental costs of using chemicals.

Three researchers in the College of Agricultural Sciences are participating in the initial stages of the program. They are Dr. Charles Pitts, professor of entomology; Dr. Edwin Rajotte, associate professor of entomology; and George Greaser, research associate in agricultural economics and rural sociology.

IPM integrates pest-control decisions into economically sustainable, ecologically based farming systems. It involves using pest-resistant plant varieties, rotating crops, adjusting planting or harvesting dates and introducing and encouraging natural predators of pests.

"IPM enables farmers to avoid excessive use of pesticides, which could endanger the environment and the health of farmers, rural citizens and consumers of agricultural products all over the world," said Pitts, who has done pest-management research in Albania and Swaziland.

"Being selected to be part of the consortium indicates that IPM researchers at Penn State are becoming nationally recognized as top experts," said Dr. J. Dean Jansma, associate dean for international programs. "The program gives Penn State an opportunity to expand its IPM efforts with other countries, helping them increase crop yields and at the same time protect the environment, farm workers and consumers.

"With international trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), promoting IPM in other countries will help ensure that imported foods are free of pesticides."

"The plan is to take a participatory approach to IPM," said Rajotte, who has studied economic impacts of different agricultural practices and has helped develop pest-management expert systems. "Many other nations already use IPM strategies. After we find out what practices a country is using, we can work with farmers, scientists and other officials to further develop IPM programs."

"Our approach will include sociological and economic considerations in these countries," said Greaser, who has helped develop farm management systems in Poland and Swaziland. "Where adoption of IPM is hindered by technical, socioeconomic, policy-related or informational constraints, every effort will be made to correct these.

"A major focus will be the role of women in IPM, because a large percentage of farmers in many developing countries are women," Greaser said. "The goal is to assist different countries in developing management systems that work for them."