

For Virginia Dairyman, Grazing The Way To Greater Profitability, Improved Herd Health

ANDY ANDREWS

Lancaster Farming Staff
PARADISE (Lancaster Co.) —

For Crimora, Virginia dairyman Bill Patterson, the work was simply too hard. Milking the cows became a relentless chore. There was no joy in dairying — the constant drive to put high production over everything else (hours worked, herd health, and happiness of his own family) simply became too much to bear.

So nearly three years ago, he opted out. Instead of relying on confinement housing, feeding truckloads of dry matter to get the milk production up, worrying about veterinarian bills and watching his cull rate skyrocket, he switched to grazing and a better lifestyle.

In April 1992, after nearly a year



Joel Salatin, Staunton, Va. grazer who operates Polyface Tree Farms, has worked out a system that is healthy for the environment and farm-profitable.

of preparation, planning, and organizing, Patterson let the first group of his Red Mill Farm 91-cow Holstein and Jersey herd out on pasture ground, a combination of orchard-grass and alfalfa, for the first time. Since that time, every dollar he has obtained from milk sales has left him with 50 cents in his pocket, he said.

Patterson told the 350 dairy farmers at Tuesday's Second Annual Southeast Pennsylvania Grazing Conference at the Dutch Town and Country Inn that the key was to make his business less reliable on spending money for increased production. Instead, using grazing, reduced materials and labor costs has produced a healthier herd, with a little less production but with more money in his pocket.

Patterson farms about 400 acres in Augusta County, Va., along with his family, a few miles away from the Blue Ridge Mountains. The land, once set up for high grain production, was converted to mostly pasture land with a combi-



Dr. Dave Zartman, professor at Ohio State University, holding microphone, spoke about the results of five years of research done on seasonal dairying. Bill Patterson, far left, reviewed the financial figures on his farm, dated from December 1989 to December 1994 (reprinted this issue of *Lancaster Farming*). In center is Tim Fritz, Montgomery County extension agent, who shared his grazing ideas from Pennsylvania farms. Seated, foreground, is Roman Stoltzfoos.

nation of alfalfa/grass mixes and some other pasture grasses, including matua.

Patterson spoke about the history of the herd. In 1991, when the herd stood at 65 cows (about half Jerseys), average production was 23,850 pounds. The herd was milked twice a day. That was the highest producing 2x herd in the state at the time. "It was a real high-producing herd," said Patterson. "But where do you go from there?"

"Why start grazing?" he said. Well, he explained that cows,

under the conventional system, were "really wearing out" with an average yearly cull rate of 41 percent (state average was about 38 percent). There wasn't one big problem, but "a little bit of everything" which led them to choose grazing.

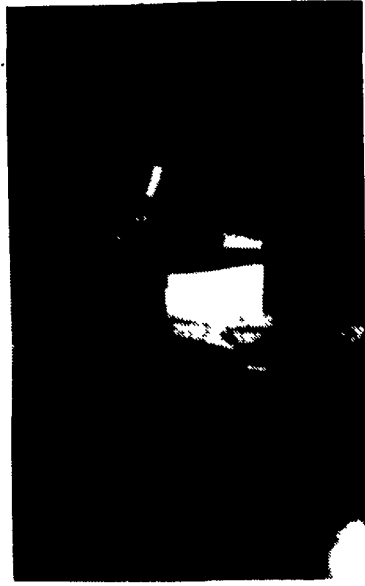
Patterson said the cows had more mastitis because of the confinement. They stood on traditional concrete floors, so heel warts was a problem. Ketosis was something they had to deal with. Pro-

duction was increased from 14,000 pounds to 22,000 pounds over an 11-year period, but the higher level of production forced more management and "more work."

If we worked hard, it was important to be rewarded for it, said Patterson. The whole system was wearing them out, working longer hours. "It just got to the point . . . where I didn't want to milk the cows anymore," he said.

Patterson wanted to spend more

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In a question and answer session that followed, Dave Forgey emphasized the importance of selecting a plant species that works well with your soil types.

PATTERSON BROTHERS DAIRY
INCOME AND EXPENSES (Annual Cash Flow) 1989 - 1994

	12/31/89	12/31/90	12/31/91	3 Yr. Avg.	12/31/92	12/31/93	12/31/94
INCOME:							
Milk Sales	\$145,065	\$174,331	\$159,651	\$159,682	\$185,752	\$204,827	\$189,068
Crop & Livestock Sales	26,378	20,010	31,260	25,883	26,592	54,487	36,348
Dividends & Refunds	16,167	16,221	16,848	16,412	16,052	22,464	22,770
Other							
GROSS FARM INCOME	\$187,610	\$210,562	\$207,759	\$201,977	\$228,396	\$281,778	\$248,186
EXPENSES:							
Breeding Fees	\$1,809	\$2,018	\$2,659	\$2,162	\$1,623	\$2,458	\$1,654
Hired Labor						5,118	1,829
Purchased feed:							
Dairy	45,422	53,470	44,319	47,737	48,442	51,891	47,175
Livestock	1,490	1,712	2,377	1,860	3,486		
Hogs	4,225	4,111	2,564	3,633	4,185		
Fertilizer, Lime	22,973	22,367	20,879	22,073	16,626	13,574	14,318
Freight, Trucking	4,796	4,986	5,745	5,176	9,861	12,210	11,109
Gasoline, Fuel, Oil	3,655	7,921	5,259	5,612	5,292	5,473	4,532
Insurance	1,952	2,101	2,214	2,089	2,216	4,100	3,842
Machine Hire	2,000	1,580	1,161	1,580	1,485	1,700	580
Rent of Farm, Pasture	2,600	2,650	3,000	2,750	2,775	2,500	2,500
Repairs, Maintenance	14,930	10,104	15,535	13,523	11,678	13,100	11,644
Seeds, Plants Purchases	4,423	4,382	2,553	3,786	7,560	4,050	5,656
DHIA	1,538	1,577	1,541	1,552	1,592	1,915	1,790
Supplies Purchased	6,822	9,034	5,908	7,255	5,225	7,625	4,240
Taxes	1,677	1,579	984	1,413	1,728	2,592	2,369
Utilities	3,958	5,692	4,658	4,769	4,827	4,430	5,534
Veterinary, Medicine	4,403	4,399	5,353	4,718	5,487	4,554	3,491
Assessments	1,807	1,957	2,630	2,131	5,189	6,827	6,420
Miscellaneous Expenses	919	1,149	147	738	4,388	895	2,080
TOTAL FARM EXPENSES	\$131,399	\$142,789	\$129,486	\$134,557	\$143,665	\$145,012	\$130,763
NET FARM INCOME	\$56,211	\$67,773	\$78,273	\$67,420	\$84,731	\$136,766	\$117,423

FINANCIAL RATIOS AND STATISTICS

	12/31/89	12/31/90	12/31/91	3 Yr. Avg.	12/31/92	12/31/93	12/31/94
Avg. # Cows on Test	61	62	62	61	77	100	91
Pounds of Milk Shipped	1,178,281	1,289,204	1,324,137	1,263,874	1,410,246	1,508,900	1,433,250
Pounds Milk Shipped/Cow	19,396	20,963	21,444	20,607	18,415	15,089	15,750
Price of Milk/CWT	\$12.31	\$13.52	\$12.06	\$12.63	\$13.17	\$13.57	\$13.42
Tot. Cash Inc./CWT Milk Sold	\$15.92	\$16.33	\$15.69	\$15.98	\$16.20	\$18.67	\$17.32
Total Cash Income/Cow	\$3,075.57	\$3,396.16	\$3,350.95	\$3,311.10	\$2,966.18	\$2,817.78	\$2,727.32
Cash Exp/CWT Milk Sold	\$11.15	\$11.08	\$9.78	\$10.65	\$10.19	\$9.61	\$9.12
Cash Expenses/Cow	\$2,154.08	\$2,303.05	\$2,088.48	\$2,205.85	\$1,865.78	\$1,450.12	\$1,436.96
Net Inc/CWT Milk Sold	\$4.77	\$5.26	\$5.91	\$5.33	\$6.01	\$9.06	\$8.19
Net Income/Cow	\$921.49	\$1,093.11	\$1,262.47	\$1,105.25	\$1,100.40	\$1,367.66	\$1,290.36
Operating Expense Ratio	70.04	67.81	62.33	66.62	62.90	51.46	52.69

Patterson reviewed the financial figures on his farm, dated from December 1989 to December 1994. Net income per cow went from \$921.49 in 1989 with 61 cows to a net income per cow of \$1,290.36 in 1994 with 91 cows.

Amazing Grazing

Amazing grazing, too simple it seems
To use the grass that's free.
But costs were up, and profits down
So now the light I've seen.
Dividing land around the barn
Into paddocks large, then small
The object is to keep the cows
On grass six inches tall.
With several rubber water tanks
And some plastic pipe we've laid,
We've found fresh water availability
To be more important than shade.
We move the cows at intervals,
No longer than a day;
If paddocks get over twelve inches tall,
Make them into hay.
Amazing grazing, too simple it seems,
But I know it works for me.
And I would rather move a little fence
Than give shots of BST.
If you'd like to help with what you've heard
Here's what I would suggest
Get in touch with the Grassland Committee,
Your County Extension, or SCS.

This poem about grazing's benefits was included in the information packet at the conference.