

Dairy Lifestyle Improves With Grazing, Season Production

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York Co. Correspondent

AIRVILLE (York Co.)— Keeping up with six miles of fence could be considered almost a full-time job by many farmers.

But for the Melvin and Barbara Marks family, the six miles of fencing crisscrossing their Airville farm has lessened the time crunch on their dairy operation.

That fencing encloses and separates their 50 tillable acres into 22 paddocks, each one and one-half acres, used for intensive rotational grazing of their 40-head dairy herd.

From early April through late fall, the Marks' registered Holsteins live outside on grass, returning to the barn only for their twice-daily milkings. The benefits, say the couple, have been many.

"I can't remember the last cystic ovary we had in a cow. We've had one twisted stomach in the last three years, and I haven't trimmed a hoof in four years," said Melvin Marks.

Forage harvest equipment use is also way down, along with diesel fuel bills. Manure hauling time has been pared. And moving the cows several times daily offers some quality family time for Mel, Barb, and their three daughters.

"We wouldn't go back to dairying the other way," said Barb. "He has more time with the family, rather than being out planting corn and baling until nine or ten o'clock at night. When you're a young mother with young children, that's important."

Now the Marks, recently named 1995 Outstanding Young Cooperator winning couple for Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative, are nudging their herd toward seasonal production, to gain even greater herd efficiencies from intensive grazing.

Melvin Marks switched from field harvesting to herd harvesting of forages four years ago, in the spring of 1992. After hearing and reading about others successfully using intensive grazing techniques, he parked his tractors, tillage, and forage harvest equipment and began stringing fence.

"We had always let the dry cows have the run of the farm any-

way over the winter," he said. "But when we first turned the milking herd out that first day, April 24, they didn't seem to know what to do."

An early spring had pushed the grass that first year and growth was already higher than was desirable. Some was wasted during the season because the herd could never catch up with the lushness, pushed by plentiful summer rains.

Marks ultimately rotary mowed some paddocks to maintain the grazing rotation schedule. But it was a learning season, one on which the couple has since built and fine-tuned with each successive year.

Thirty of the 50 acres of paddocks are pastured the most intensively, planted to a combination of alfalfa and orchardgrass. The other 20 acres, sown with Ladino clover, perennial ryegrass and birdsfoot trefoil, are grazed if the summer becomes hot and dry and baled for hay if not needed for pasturing. A parcel of rented ground nearby provides additional haylage and forage crops, plus added disposal acreage for winter's lagoon-held manure.

"The cows love the alfalfa and orchardgrass, but don't seem to like the clover mix quite as well," said Marks of his pasture mixes.

Milking cows go onto grass just as early as it starts to grow, usually about April 1. During periods of fastest growth, the paddocks may be split into halves or thirds, and grazed portions of the day. Grazing rate averages to about one paddock per day over the season, Marks figures, unless mid-summer weather turns extremely hot and droughty.

Water is available in all paddocks through a system of hoses and moveable plastic barrels. Additional watering troughs are on this summer's things-to-do list.

While Marks purchased a flexible tine harrow to drag the pastures and break up manure clumps, he rarely uses it. Grass-diet manure remains loose and usually disappears into the soil after a single soaking rainfall.

"It's almost amazing, but the bacteria and the earthworms in the ground really help break down the manure. We've always tried to



Melvin and Barbara Marks are the 1995 Young Cooperator Couple winner for Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers Cooperative. Four years ago, the Marks switched to intensive-grazing dairying and are now adjusting their herd toward a seasonal production pattern. They find they now have more time for family and community activities with their daughters, from left, Erin, Nicole, and Trisha.



Helpers are right behind and eagerly waiting for fresh grass when the Marks' daughters walk out to move the fence ahead in the narrow grazing strips of timothy-clover used for young stock. From left are Nicole, Trisha, and Erin.

avoid harsh chemicals and fertilizers as much as possible, even before grazing. You can hardly walk through the pastures in the morning without stepping on earthworms, plus the various bugs and birds also help with break-

down," said Marks.

Manure consistency is a gauge Marks uses to regulate his feeding of other components. Both dry hay of good quality and a rougher, higher-fiber type are available to cows daily, along with the grass. High-moisture corn and a soybean meal round out the milking herd diet. In-barn feed consumption drops to less than half when grass becomes the diet mainstay.

"The cows generally get grain

and hay around lunchtime and they'll come in from the pastures, if they want it, and then go right back out again. It almost seems that as soon as they consume some fiber, they'll want more grass," Barb said.

"We haven't force fed any minerals in two years," Marks said about the feeding program. Several free choice minerals are offered, and the cows seem to naturally

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HOMESTEAD NOTES



As Melvin Marks swung aside a single strand of fence to a new paddock, the family's milking herd followed right on his heels. Waiting in the wings to clean up leftovers in the previous location were the bred helpers and dry cows. A system of moveable plastic tubs and hoses make water available to all the Marks' 22 paddocks.

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Bupp has been a correspondent and columnist for *Lancaster Farming* since the late '70s. Her weekly column is published in the *York Dispatch*. Bupp's work has also published in *Hoard's Dairyman*, *Holstein World*, *Farm Journal*, and the *Dairyman News*. She is chairman of the Souvenir Booklet committee for the June 1995 National Holstein Convention, hosted in Pittsburgh.

In 1993, Bupp was named World Dairy Expo's Dairy Woman of the Year. She serves on the corporate and coastal division boards of Mid-America Dairyman and is secretary of the board of Baltimore-area Dairy Council.

The Bupps also have a daughter, Patricia Bacha, a business and computer professor at Portland Community College, Portland, Oregon.



Buppplynn Farms, Seven Valleys, York County, is the home of Joyce Bupp, husband Leroy and their son Rich, a 1995 Penn State ag business/technology major who has returned home to farm with the family. The Bupp family milks 200 head of registered Holsteins and farms 800 acres of corn, hay, and soybeans.