Grazing Livestock Is Combination Art, Technical Application

(Continued from Page A1)

have been preparing grazing areas first by culturing mixes of perennials and some annuals, mostly mixes of grasses, legumes and brassicas, and some small grains.

Nutrient value of these living plants is testing high in protein, good fiber, micronutrients, etc., as well as offering palatability.

According to speakers, in some instances, this type of operation may be the only viable choice to continue dairying. It has been said that many people are apparently living off of the depreciation of equipment and buildings in order to continue their mainstream operations.

Overall, the current portrait of what speakers have been describing as their successful incorporation of grazing into existing Pennylvania dairies is one of treating crop fields as more than places to raise feed to harvest for the herd, and pastures as more than exercise lots.

While corn silage, haylage, total mixed rations, using nutrition consultants, top dressing, and testing forages continues in many cases, dairy farmers have been telling of reducing production costs by incorporating additional grazing techniques and making cattle harvest grasses and living forages during the majority of the year.

High production per animal is not as high a priority, according to most who have switched to grazing. The priority seems more to be that whatever size the operation, it must be profitable.

While farm management experts can and have advised on the amount of sales necessary to support a full-time job on a farm, as well as advising on the proportion of living expenses that can be enjoyed without jeopardizing the financial health of the farming operation, graziers have taken a different tact.

Some dairy graziers have said they accept a reduced rolling herd average production of milk and milk components because the milk they sell is at a profit or a higher profit than when they made more milk using high confinement dairying techniques.

The milk sold per person working is still a consideration in determining how many people can be supported by the farm. However, with reduced costs and inputs, there is less need for additional work and thus employees, some have said.

The balance of cows-to-land to the percentage of feed gotten through grazing that can support a family of four has not yet been offered by those who have converted to grazing, but many have said that have they been able to realize increased profit and better living expenses through decreased operating costs.

And most have said they now enjoy farming much more.

Speakers said that if the farming operation is viewed more on a basis of cost per hundredweight, or, as in New Zealand, on a cost or profit-per-hectare (equal to 2.47 acres) basis, then it is easier to see the economic and labor benefits that come from relying more heavily on having the animals feed from the fields than having the farmer go the field, harvest the feed and bring it to the cows.

One speaker satirically joked that some university researchers have just completed some studies and have concluded that cows are mobile and grass is immobile.

That message was repeated in several different ways by various speakers. The main message seemed to be one that has been told before by others — make the farm work for the farmer, instead of having the farmer work for the farm.

Alan Henning was one of the featured speakers and reiterated that message by telling the audience of several hundred to "take control!"

Henning spent 14 months in New Zealand — nine months on a Fulbright Scholarship — and learned the basics of grazing from mentor John Hopkins, a dairy farmer there for whom Henning worked while pursuing continuing studies.

Henning also met and married a New Zealand woman and spent several years working in New Zealand consulting and helping to set up grazing operations. He has also worked setting up operations in Mexico as well as helping in the United States.

He and his wife have published a 20-page handbook on grazing that provides an overview and examples of basic tools and considerations in grazing. The handbook is free and can be obtained by calling 1-800-441-FENCE. It may be available locally through certain dealers.

In brief, Henning said that dairy grazing requires a different outlook and perspective than the current traditional year-round feeding of stored or prepared feeds.

According to Henning, the basics of grazing are consistent no matter where in the world it is done — the grasses and forages that grow can be consumed by a bovine under the animal's own power and converted in milk.

The goal is to keep the program as simple as possible — the fewest amount of tools, equipment and operating costs should be used.

Henning referred to the "art of stockmanship" and said that many in the dairy industry have to learn what that is to make grazing work.

In effect, he defined stockmanship as the ability to observe and understand the needs of cattle and the plants they consume, the environmental conditions, and to control the activity for peak efficiency.

Henning's presentation consisted of slides and stories of different grazing operations he helped with at different places and climates in the world and stories of how he was able to see through a problem that wasn't a problem.

He also told about his own interests, attraction to dairying and grazing and his own dairying operation and decisions he has made.

Of some of the basics to grazing, Henning said that the farmer has to get to know his land intimately — and this can only be done by walking the property at least three times per month and making notes. He said in this way, the grazier can keep aware of changes in the fields and plants and then be in good position to make decisions.

The lay of the land and its characteristics have to be taken into account, such as which slopes face south and north, prevailing winds and existing plant populations.

The tillability of the soil isn't as necessary as considering the ability of grasses to grow there and produce tonnage of cattle forage. Henning said to consider everything.

"Think outside the box," he said several times, after explaining that he heard the phrase while in New Zealand and it refers to considering alternatives to conventional ideas.

"I always consider the extremes," he explained. He said he always considers doing something one way and then totally opposite, adding that the practical way is almost always in between, but without considering both extremes, the range of possibilities is more limited.

Also, Henning said that his grazing mantra learned while in New Zealand has become, "No excuses. Get it done now!"

In his case, he was referring to situations where people would ask him what to do with grazing because they thought they had run out of suitable grazing area.

Henning said that in one case, an unfenced field that had not yet been cultivated for grazing but had a good stand of native grasses at about the proper grazing height was across a little traveled road from a field that had been grazed.

The grazier wanted to know what to do. Henning said he asked him whose field was across the road and the grazier said it was his. Henning said he told the man to open the electric fence and move the cattle into the adjacent field.

He said the farmer complained that he couldn't because there was no fence set up or water available. He was afraid the cattle would run.

Henning said that to himself, the immediate problem was getting the cattle to graze good forage, and so he proceeded to take the herd across the street and while they stayed there grazing, he went to get some wire fencing and a watering container. He then ran some hose to the waterer from the water source in the other field, through a culvert in the road, and the man's cattle were back grazing again.

While that approach may not appeal to those in more highly populated areas with heavy traffic, and it may make insurance people flinch, Henning said that what it illustrates is that the cattle are not wild animals, but domesticated animals that will stay where feed is good.

Some of Henning's theories may not stand up to industry review — he advocates no wormers, no vaccinations, etc., nothing that is not absolutely necessary to the act of cattle grazing.

As far as milking, he said that at the farm he currently rents, he has adapted an older existing tie-stall milking setup to a walk-through milking station setup that he said allows him to milk about 60 cows himself in less than an hour.

He said "I don't have time" to herd the cows in for milking — as they come through to be milked they get milked. He said he used about a dozen broken and discarded barn gates that were lying around the farm and with baling twine created a kind of a flat parlor based on the New Zealand field design.

He admitted it didn't look pretty, but he said it was effective and fast and the cows didn't mind at all.

In fact, he said that a couple who heard about the setup wanted to try it. Henning said the man and wife, after milking Henning's cows, were amazed at the calmness of his cows and said that their own cattle wouldn't be as calm.

Henning said that goes to the heart of stockmanship — the cows should be made to work, but not be harried or afraid, and that reflects an understanding of the animal.

In addition to walking the farm, a key to grazing is observation. "Observation," Henning said. "Everybody has it, but all use it at different levels."

He said that when he first started working for Hopkins in New Zealand as a Fulbright scholar, Hopkins told him to take a walk down to the cows to observe what was going on.

Henning said he took off, went down to the cows, saw where they were and came back.

At Henning's quick return to the farm house, Hopkins said that he was amazed as how quickly Henning got the job done.

Then Hopkins began questioning Henning on details about the cows, the grasses, the other fields, the fencing, etc.

Henning took off again, he said, armed with paper and pencil.

This time he figured he would be ready to answer Hopkins' questions.

When he returned from his second trip, armed with notes of observations concerning the cows, Hopkins questioned him, but this time about different aspects and conditions of the farm and operation.

Henning said he was humbled, because he realized that he had a lot of learn. He said he is still learning.

But he told the story to illustrate that until one knows what it is they are looking at, they don't really see what they need to see to make a sound decision.

Decision-making is a constant activity of a successful grazier. The weather changes daily, the grass grows differently daily, the cattle change slightly daily.

Further, in a family farm or partnership operation, communications is key, because each can share thoughts and observations that will help make better decisions and expand the knowledge of each

(Turn to Page A28)