

Shirleys Enjoy Rotational Grazing

KAREN BUTLER

Maryland Correspondent

SILVER RUN, Md. — Glenn Shirley and his father Henry milk about 80 grade Holsteins on their dairy farm at Silver Run in Carroll County.

Until three years ago the father and son farmed conventionally, but in 1995 they made the switch to rotationally grazing the herd.

After doing a lot of reading and research, and some experimenting of their own, the Shirleys seem to have come up with a system that works well for them.

Glenn, who is also president of the Carroll County Farm Bureau, says implementing the grazing program came about in steps but really started in full force in 1995.

The decision to make the break from farming traditionally involved several considerations for the Shirleys.

One of the main motivations was pretty basic; he and his father decided they really didn't like growing corn.

"A lot of the jobs associated with growing corn neither Dad nor I particularly liked to do," Glenn said. "And we weren't satisfied with the yields we were getting. We put a pencil to paper, and we wondered if we could just grow a lot of alfalfa. Then we started in rotationally grazing. We still grow some alfalfa, but I think we're tentatively working away from that."

The last time they planted corn was in 1994.

"The scariest part about it is when all your neighbors are planting corn, and you're not!" laughed Henry Shirley of the decision to graze the cows.

The Shirleys were also at a point where they were getting ready to have to make a big financial investment in replacing a lot of equipment.

Glenn's mother, Pat, is active on the farm and milks the cows. His wife, Debbie, a computer programmer, stays home to raise the couple's two daughters, Barbara, age 8, and Ruth, age 6.

The Shirleys' farm is 400 acres, including a woodlot of about 120 acres. Glenn estimates cultivated land, including pasture, at 200 acres. There are nine pastures centrally located around the barn, in pie-shaped pieces.

Cows exit the barn and go down a short lane and then into a common area and out whichever gate Glenn has opened for them.

Two concrete waterers with captured springs allow the cows access to water when they are turned out.

Later in the summer when the grass is growing slower, Glenn and his father fence off strips in another area that used to be corn and alfalfa fields, but in the meantime they take a first cutting off those strips and bale it.

There is perimeter fencing up around the farm consisting of two strands of electrified high tensile wire. The strips that used to be in corn and alfalfa are partitioned off with temporary electric tape.

"We square off about an acre with fence, and those are nighttime pastures, because there is no shade," explained Glenn.

Glenn said having the barn centrally located helps. "There are some other places I'd love to pasture, but it's just too far from the barn," he said.

The cows have access to hay in the barnyard at all times, but often ignore it for days at a time, according to Glenn. There is a computer feeder and four stalls in the

barnyard. Currently Glenn is feeding an 8 percent custom ration.

"Right now the grasses are at least 20-22 percent protein so giving them any more protein would be ridiculous," he said, "Over winter we feed a 14 percent ration, and that's about the highest."

"The thing I'm real excited about now is we bought bale wrappers to make hay silage," Glenn said. "We tried it last year, and what we got (with the drought) I really liked. I'm hoping to get more this year."

The Shirleys are experimenting with different grasses for different conditions. They've had success with Matua Grass, a grass from New Zealand.

"What impressed us about that was last year with the drought, two of the strips were in Matua Grass, and we kept going back to those two strips," said Glenn. "It tends to do real well under dry conditions, and it's very forgiving in terms of management. Even if it gets old, the cows seem to like it."

"Matua is damn near as expensive as an acre of alfalfa to establish, so you have to weigh that against itself when looking at how many years a stand is going to last," he said.

They have also experimented with Alfa-graze alfalfa, some New Zealand pasture grass mixes, and Marshall rye, looking at establishment cost and performance. Regular Orchardgrass seems to score a lot of points with Glenn.

He said, "I'm starting to think that Orchardgrass is really a pretty good deal. It seems like one kind of grass that really wants to grow around here. It's completely free of pests. And you can bale it and wrap it in plastic when it's a little overmature." He tried Switchgrass and Bluestem the first year, but didn't get very good stands from either.

The cows seem to be happy with the system. Even out in the pouring rain the day the picture for this story was taken they were spread out evenly over their pasture grazing.

"That's what we like to see," said Glenn. He said there was, however, a definite learning curve with the cows when they first switched to grazing. In summer, the cows do their vast majority of eating at night, when the sun has gone down and they have a little bit longer period of time in the pasture.

The herd is not on test; Glenn estimates his rolling herd average might be around 17,000 pounds of milk.

They are experimenting with crossbreeding some heifers with Milking Shorthorn, Ayrshire, Dutch Belted, and Norwegian Red (a polled dairy breed) to see if they are suitable for grazing.

"We're looking for a trouble-free cow, as opposed to breeding for increased milk production," said Glenn, "a cow that will breed easy, have less cases of milk fever, be good foragers. We're not looking for milk production per cow as much as we're looking for milk production per acre."

Glenn said that although there is a lot of information saying when cows should be rotated, his formula is pretty simple. "We watch the cows, we watch the grass, and we watch the milk in the tank."

"I don't think we're any kind of authority on it," said Glenn. "We're more like an average sized farm with average production who just tried it. And it worked."



From the left, Glenn and father Henry Shirley operate a family dairy farm in Silver Run Maryland using grazing techniques.

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania



Governor's Office

PROCLAMATION

JUNE DAIRY MONTH
June 1998

WHEREAS, Pennsylvania's dairy industry is the leading agricultural industry in Pennsylvania, contributing 38 percent of all agricultural income and generating nearly \$1.67 billion in revenues to the economy of this Commonwealth; and

WHEREAS, our 10,500 dairy farm families with their 644,000 cows produce 10.6 billion pounds or seven percent of the nation's total supply of milk annually, ranking Pennsylvania fourth in the nation in milk production; and

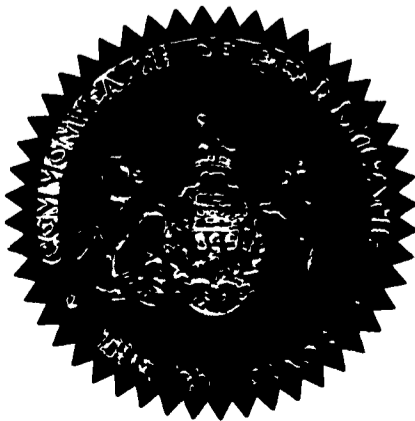
WHEREAS, June Dairy Month offers an opportunity to recognize both farm families and the food processors who provide consumers with a wide variety of fresh wholesome dairy products which supply essential nutrients and are a vital part of a healthy diet; and

WHEREAS, Pennsylvania's General Assembly on April 29, 1992, designated milk as Pennsylvania's official beverage; and

WHEREAS, Pennsylvania is proud of its dairy industry and the important contribution it makes to our economy and the welfare of our citizens. We salute dairy farmers and their families for the strength and vitality they bring to rural communities throughout the Commonwealth, and their commitment to using the most modern technology for maximum efficiency.

THEREFORE, In recognition of our thriving dairy industry, I, TOM RIDGE, Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, do hereby proclaim June 1998 as DAIRY MONTH in Pennsylvania. I urge all citizens to enjoy the Commonwealth's official beverage and other dairy products while recognizing the industry's contributions to our economy and our health.

GIVEN under my hand and the Seal of the Governor, at the City of Harrisburg, this first day of June in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and ninety-eight and of the Commonwealth the two hundred and twenty-second.



Tom Ridge

TOM RIDGE
Governor