

# Reeds Canarygrass 'Saves' Grazier From Drought

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Forgey, who spoke during the first of a two-day Pennsylvania Grazing and Forage Conference at the Grantville Holiday Inn, noted that as many as 160 dairy animals fed on the reeds canarygrass for about six weeks.

The conference was sponsored by the Pennsylvania Forage and Grassland Council (PFGC) and the Penn State-USDA-ARS Grazing Research and Education Center.

"I think we have a lot to learn about reeds canarygrass," said Forgey. One farmer Forgey spoke to believes the grass is "the best crop grown on droughty soils," he noted. As a single species, according to the dairyman, it could have a place on graziers' land.

Forgey spoke both days about his eight years of grazing experience.

He made the transition in the very early '90s from a non-grazing, conventional dairy to a pasture-based, seasonal dairy.

Forgey, who has been farming since 1961, spoke about the history of his transition to the pasture-based dairying. Though the '70s were profitable with dairies, in the next decade, things changed — somewhat drastically.

In the 1980s, land values evaporated. With the severe drought of 1988, increasing cattle hoof problems, and the high price of feed and equipment, Forgey noted he had to make the decision: either change his ways or get out of the business altogether.

After attending the Illinois Forage Council meeting in 1991, Forgey realized, he said, "we were burned out. Things looked tough." He said he thought about walking away from farming.

But determined to continue as a third-generation farmer, he learned about pasture-based dairying and told his family, "I believe I found a way to save our farm."

In 1991, starting with the bred heifers, he began a small grazing operation. By 1992, he was turning out the cows on the pasture, building fence, and finding other ways to cut costs.

Forgey fenced in 120 acres and pastured 160 cows. Forgey buried water lines and, after five

years of growth, Forgey had placed 280 acres in pastures. It cost him about \$7,000 for the water system and about \$3,000 for lanes (measuring 10 feet wide, using number 4 rock with ag lime over the top).

Additional land he purchased was in continuous corn for 40 years and had many grass problems. Forgey simply seeded rye and pastured it. Some muck soil was seeded with reeds canarygrass in 1993.

In the conference proceedings book, Forgey noted the grass "was our salvation for the '99 grazing season." They extended the rest period on the cool season grass pastures and concentrated on the reeds canarygrass. As a kind of cushion to be used in drought conditions, Forgey said, the grass continued to recover because of the water-holding capacity of the muck soils, and "frequent grazings didn't seem to hamper the vigor of the plant."

He wrote, "I have been amazed at the ability reeds has to recover and spread. In fact, the most challenging aspect of using reeds canarygrass has been trying to find a legume species that can survive under its heavy suppression."

The farm continues to sow Alsike clover on a semiannual basis, a good mate for the reeds, "but its biannual status makes it an inefficient legume for this purpose." He noted that finding a good, high-quality legume species is critical to a grazing system.

Forgey manages approximately 85 paddocks ranging from 2.5-5 acres in size. The av-



Winners of this year's PFGC Research/Extension/Teaching Award is the Penn Jersey Extension Partnership. From left, Duane Stevenson, Everett Chamberlain, Nancy Kadwill, Robert Mickel, and Greg Solt. Not present: Donna Foulk.

erage size of the paddock is 3.5 acres. The size of paddocks is based on anticipated consumption of the grass/legume mix.

Forgey noted that he does have a few acres of alfalfa-orchardgrass that he harvests for baleage from early May to June. In July and August, those same fields are grazed.

Forgey begins harvesting at 8 inches in height for baling. For pasturing, the reeds canarygrass was grazed at 12 inches in height for no longer than three days to ensure grass recovery. "Overgrazing tends to weaken root reserves," he said.

Forgey uses Holstein/New Zealand crossbred genetics in his herd.

Forgey noted he has seen definite improvement in the soil's organic matter since he began rotational grazing.

He also said the dairy does no winter housing. "There's been no trimmer at the farm in seven years," he said.

Though his system can be complex at times, Forgey told farmers there are "more simple ways to do many of the things I did. When you're the first guy out there, you tend to do some things you wouldn't have had to do."

The conference also highlighted award winners during its recognition banquet Wednesday evening.

The PFGC Awards Program was established to recognize individuals in Pennsylvania who have made an outstanding contribution to some aspect of forage and grassland improvement in the state, according to Marvin Hall, Penn State forage

specialist.

Awards are made annually when there is a worthy candidate. Following are the award recipients.

• PFGC Special Award. The Special Award is the highest recognition given by PFGC, Hall noted. It is presented to an individual or company that has made a major contribution directly to the PFGC and an outstanding contribution to Pennsylvania's forage and livestock industry and/or conservation farming. The recipients' contribution may have been in production agriculture, industry, research, extension, teaching, or other public service. New Holland North America located in New Holland is this

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