

Grazing Lowers Capital Investment

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would eat too much moisture in the grass. You're either going to get a cow that milks a lot, but gets real thin and has health problems or she will go off milk and not be profitable."

Wolfe has started to use New Zealand Holstein genetics, which are more conducive to grazing. The New Zealand cows average 900 pounds in weight compared to U.S. Holsteins, which average 1,200 pounds.

"The main method of dairy-ing in New Zealand is seasonal grazing," said Wolfe. "So the cows run higher components. You've also got a smaller cow that will be more efficient on grass."

Wolfe's herd is seasonal with cows freshening from February through April. "It's easier to manage," said Wolfe. "We only have two groups of heifers because they're all born during the same time of year. We also dry all of our cows off right before Christmas."

When he originally moved onto the farm, Wolfe worked with a nutrition consultant to balance the pastures for grazing. Currently he is growing perennial rye grass, fescue, orchard grass, grazing timothy, grazing alfalfa, matua brome grass, and one paddock of chickory.

Wolfe has set up 18 paddocks on his farm and uses portable fence to rotate the cattle. The paddocks range in acreage with the largest ones being 14 to 16 acres. However, the cows only feed on one acre at a time. A water line with a riser every 300 feet provides water to every paddock.

"We give the cows fresh grass three times a day," said Wolfe. "They're also fed five pounds of grain in the barnyard before each milking."

The cows are kept on pasture year round and do not have access to the barn. During the hot summer months with temperatures above 90 degrees, Wolfe will bring the cows to the barnyard a couple of hours before milking to run sprinklers over them.

"During the summer when we're feeding alfalfa, we will let them graze on the alfalfa during the daytime and then move them to grass pasture in the night," said Wolfe. "Otherwise, we put the cows on whatever's available."

When pastures are thin, Wolfe will supplement with baleage. This spring he baled 20 acres of first cutting hay, which will be incorporated into the

grazing program this summer for pasture slow down. He also put out 25 acres of sundane grass for summer pasture.

Pastures are replaced every 10 years. During the months he isn't milking, Wolfe works at Mason Dixon dairy farm.

Wolfe overwinters his cows outside. He normally puts the cows out in a 10-acre plot that needs replaced. The cows are fed round bales and can tear up the pasture, getting it ready to re-plant in the spring.

One way Wolfe keeps his capital investment low is by hiring custom work. He owns a tractor loader, Areway aerator, and disk mower.

"When I put seed out, I have to hire a person to drill for me," said Wolfe. "I also hire someone to make the baleage and haul manure for me."

Wolfe rents the property from Tom Murren, a retired dairy farmer. He first started renting in 1996 and came out the fall before he moved in the cows to plant 33 acres of rye. One week before he moved the cows, he set up the fences.

"I spent a couple years prior to renting the farm learning as much as I could about grazing," he said. "I went on Franklin County pasture walks and went to the Lancaster County grazing conference."

Before renting his own farm, Wolfe worked on Mains Dairy Farm in Newburg. The 300-cow dairy farm gave Wolfe the opportunity to build up his herd before he left. By the spring of 1996, Wolfe had 25 cows in the Mains herd.

"I did sell 10 of my cows back to the Mains farm because their dates were off," said Wolfe. "I went seasonal right from the start. The cows I bought were all late fall to early spring calvers that I held over to calve in the late spring."

When he moved onto the farm, he converted the tie-stall barn into a double-four flatbed milking parlor. The Wolfes milk twice a day and average 13,258 pounds per cow with 3.4 percent protein and four percent fat.

One of the benefits of rotational grazing is improved herd health. According to Wolfe, he has very few mastitis outbreaks or displaced abomasums. The somatic cell count averages about 180,000.

"We do have to cull for cows that don't make the breeding window," said Wolfe. "So the herd's average age is at about three lactations. About one-third of our herd is made up of

first-calf heifers."

Over the years, Wolfe has learned from his mistakes. The first spring he grazed, he was feeding high amounts of grain.

"We had one cow get a twisted stomach and had a few cases of milking fever," said Wolfe. "But it's a learning curve."

Jeff's wife Sandy helps milk in the evenings and drives school bus. Their son Jason is 11 years old and has a Jersey calf in the 4-H dairy club.

Wolfe came from an Illinois farm where they milked 40 head of registered Brown Swiss. He moved east in 1985 to work for Mason Dixon Farms. His younger brother is now taking over his family's farm in Illinois and is converting the dairy to grazing.



Converting the tie stall barn to a double-four milking parlor, Wolfe was able to begin milking his herd with very low start-up costs.

Dairy Grazing Dollar And Sense

In a New York Dairy Farm Business Summary, grazing dairy herds netted \$128 more per cow per year than herds that didn't graze.

According to Dr. Lawrence Muller, professor of dairy & animal science at Penn State, that figure is in line with other grazing studies conducted over the past eight years. Compiling the 20 studies, Muller and his colleagues found that grazing herds averaged \$150 per cow per year in income above conventional herds.

Some of that increase in net income is due to lower feed costs, lower vet bills, and improved herd health. In the New York summary, grazing herds averaged \$50 to 100 less in annual purchased feed costs and \$20 less in veterinarian expenses.

"You do have consider the

cost of pasture," said Muller. "We figure that pasture is about three cents per pound of dry matter or \$60 per ton of dry matter." That figure includes land charges, fertilizer costs, fencing, water systems, and other expenses.

Annual milk production for grazing herds is slightly lower than in conventional herds. In the New York summary, the grazing herds averaged 17,600 pounds per cow per year compared to 18,200 pounds in conventional herds.

"That's a little bit less of a difference than what we've seen here," said Muller.

The benefits that Muller sees in grazing include higher profits, less labor, and improved herd health.

"One thing we're seeing in Pennsylvania and New York is that the herds are getting larger," said Muller. "But cull

rates in grazing herds still average about 23 percent compared to the industry standard of 30 percent."

Muller recommends that any farmers interested in grazing take the time to learn everything that they can before they get started. "Go visit other grazers who are successful and making a profit. Attend meetings and collect all the data you can."

According to Muller, not everyone is successful at grazing. "It's a completely different type of management than with non-grazing herds," he said. "It could take two to three years to learn what it takes."

"The most important thing to learn is pasture management," said Muller. "You need to have your pasture feedbunk full, which means you need to have adequate intake for your cows. It takes daily management."

Survey: Consumers Don't Know Most Dairy Farms Are Family-Owned

ROSEMONT, IL. — A striking example of the gap between American consumer knowledge and the realities of dairy farming, a recent dairy industry survey indicates a majority of U.S. consumers believe most dairy farms are not owned by farmers and their families, according to Linda Eatherton, vice president of industry relations for Dairy Management Inc. (DMI).

In a random nationwide survey by Roper Starch Worldwide, consumers were asked to identify who they think owns more than 90 percent of dairy farms in the United States. Thirty percent said agricultural-related corporations own dairy farms, while another 21 percent said other business corporations or food manufacturers. About ten percent said the government owns them.

In reality, according to Eatherton, U.S. Department of Agriculture data indicates families own and operate more than 99 percent of all U.S. dairy farms.

"This misperception about who produces our nation's milk is just one example showing the

vast gap between consumer beliefs and the realities of dairy farming," she said. "As more consumers become further removed from production agriculture, the gap continues to widen."

DMI and the regional dairy organizations, American Dairy Association/Dairy Council Middle Atlantic and Pennsylvania Dairy Promotion Program, have partnered with other dairy industry groups to develop a long-term education program to address and correct such consumer misperceptions.

"The dairy industry is united to reach misinformed consumers with factual information on a wide range of dairy farming

issues," said Eatherton.

Farmer-funded education efforts allow the dairy industry to explain its story, she said. "Consumers can now begin learning the facts about herd health measures dairy farmers practice daily, our high safety standards that ensure quality dairy products, and environmental stewardship programs being developed across the country."

These consumer awareness programs also benefit dairy farmers, Eatherton said. "The more confident the public is about how milk is produced, the more confident they'll be in selecting dairy products off the shelves at their local supermarket."



Cows are healthier on grass, according to Jeff Wolfe. His herd has fewer digestive and reproductive problems than average herds. He also has few cases of mastitis outbreaks.

JUNE IS
DAIRY
MONTH