Does Grazing Have A Place With Larger Herds?

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A few years ago, I made a presentation on the potential use of pasture in larger dairy herds. Recently, Tim Beck, the Capitol Region Dairy Team Coordinator, wrote an article entitled "Grazing is Good."

Reflecting on this earlier presentation and Tim's recent article stimulated a "relook" at grazing and raised the question: "does grazing have a place with larger dairy herds?" People have different answers to this question, as they do on most subjects.

First, let us briefly take a historical look at the "grazing movement." Dairy producers in Pennsylvania and in the United States have been experiencing a severe cost-price squeeze since the early 1980s because of relatively stable milk prices and increasing input costs.

Well-managed grazing systems offer a management alternative to reduce the costs during the typical six- to seven-month pasture season in the Northeast, and is a major reason for the increased use of pasture as a forage for dairy cows. The re-adoption of pasture-based systems in the late 1980s was initially with herds of 35 to 70 cows. About 15 percent of Pennsylvania dairy farms are using a pasture-based grazing system. A recent Wisconsin study reported 23 percent of the dairy producers in Wisconsin are using a pasture-based system.

Economics And Sustainability

Dairy farmers have survived shrinking profit margins during these 20 years basically by increasing milk production per cow, increasing herd sizes, and becoming better managers. Change is occurring at a rapid rate in the dairy industry and in all of agriculture.

Although many excellent articles and presentations have provided insight and guidance for future success, no one person has the wisdom to accurately predict what will be needed to be competitive in the future. Excellent management, high profitability, and environment sustainability will likely be important parts of future successful dairy farms.

Many dairy producers are at critical crossroads. Some of the future decisions to be competitive include expanding the business, specializing in high profit centers, and adopting strategies to reduce costs such as grazing, or perhaps all of the above. About five percent of dairy farms make the decision to exit dairying each year.

Outside U.S. Borders

In travels to other countries, one usually gains a different perspective and appreciation for our dairy industry and agriculture as a whole. Grazing is still the major dairy production system in many countries throughout the world. I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to travel in several countries during the last 12 years. These countries range from 100 percent pasture systems in New Zealand and Ireland, to perhaps 30 percent in South Africa.

In New Zealand, Argentina, and South Africa, the dairy farms that are grazing have substantially larger herds than more pasture-based systems in the U.S. The availability of relative inexpensive land in Argentina and South Africa makes this possible.

A few years ago, I stayed with a New Zealand dairy farmer who had 1,500 Jerseys and also visited several other large herds. It is interesting that in recent years, this gentleman and his fellow New Zealanders have "discovered" corn silage as a feedstuff to compliment the pasture-based system. The growth of dairy herds to 1,500 to 4,000 cows is now common in the South Island of New Zealand.

In South Africa this past winter, I had the enjoyable opportunity of participating in a three-day management program attended by 300 progressive large dairy herd owners (with more than 300 cows). Most were using a pasture-based system with about nine to 10 months of grazing. We visited a young, progressive dairy farmer who had 3,500 cows. Most of the dairy managers who attended this meeting have adopted a partial total mixed ration (pTMR) feeding system (partial because pasture is not part of the TMR) to compliment the pasture. Corn silage has become a major forage for the pTMR.

In Argentina, dairymen have the climate to graze nine to 10 months per year, and many use a pTMR to compliment the pasture. Herd size is often 100 to 200 cows with larger herds ranging from 1,000 to 3,000 cows.

During a recent visit, we toured a progressive, highly profitable 4,000 cow grazing farm in Uruguay. The owner/manager of this farm would be successful managing a dairy farm in the U.S. and in most other countries.

Change and growth is occurring in the dairy industry in these countries, similar to that occurring in the U.S. with confinement operations. In these countries, as in the U.S., many dairy producers are at a crossroads regarding the growth of the business, specialization, and adoption of new management strategies to remain a competitive business. Interestingly, the adoption of management strategies from the U.S., such as the use of pTMR and the increasing use of corn silage with a pasture-based system, has enhanced the profitability of the dairy industry in these countries.

Profitability Of U.S Grazing Systems

As discussed, "readoption" of pasture-based systems in the 1980s was stimulated by relatively stable

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