

Does Grazing Have A Place

(Continued from Page 28)

milk prices, increasing feed costs, and the increase in all farm costs, which resulted in shrinking profit margins.

Many dairy "graziers" are now increasing herd size to generate the income needed for the goals and lifestyle of their farm families. In Pennsylvania, there are many grazing herds above 80 to 100 cows, with five to six herds between 200 to 400 cows.

A 1999 farm business analysis study examined the performance and profitability of grazing farms in Michigan, Wisconsin, and New York. Average profitability, based on net farm income (NFI)/cow, ranged from \$543 to \$796/cow.

High-producing grazing herds averaged \$1,100 NFI/cow in Michigan (average herd size of 132 cows) and \$923 NFI/cow in New York (average herd size of 53 cows.)

The top 20 percent of large non-grazing herds (average of 823 cows) averaged \$808 NFI/cow in New York.

The figures comparing well-managed grazing and nongrazing herds indicate that the NFI/cow is similar or slightly better in grazing herds. Obviously the larger herd sizes of nongrazing operations in the study result in higher total farm income.

Does grazing have a place with larger, confinement herds? A common observation from pasture-based farms in the U.S. and other countries is that cows are

older and average four to five lactations per cow, substantially more than commonly found with confinement operations.

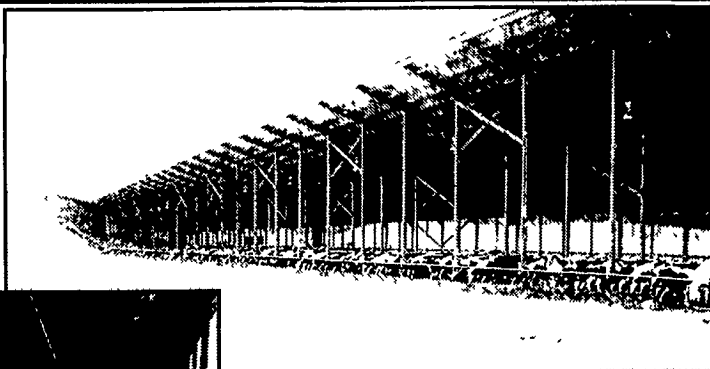
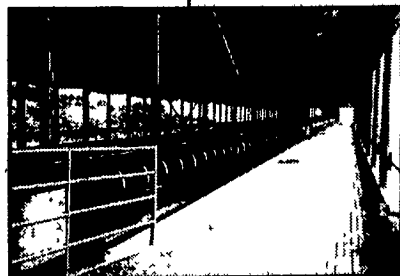
The nonvoluntary culling rates in grazing herds are often 10 to 15 percent lower than with confinement operations.

Foot health and lameness are a major issue to dairy producers because of increasing occurrence and economic losses. The major types of foot problems — including foot rot, heel erosions, laminitis, ulcers, and digital dermatitis (hairy warts) — contribute to major losses estimated to be a minimum of \$90 to \$100/case. These losses are often subtle, and include body weight loss and decreased milk yield, dry matter intake, and herd longevity, and reproductive efficiency. Getting cows off concrete for a few months a year should be beneficial to foot health. The current high price of replacement heifers makes lower culling rates quite profitable. As a sidebar, foot health is not a topic that is very high on the "radar screen" in the world in pasture-based countries.

Many graziers in Pennsylvania have adopted a "hybrid" system, which combines pasture with a pTMR, which uses the existing equipment and feedstuffs on a farm. In a recent research study at Penn State, cows that grazed for 1/2 day, where they consumed about 16 pounds of pasture dry matter (DM) and were fed a pTMR for the other 1/2 day, produced seven pounds more milk/cow/day (70 vs. 63

(Turn to Page 30)

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