

Grazing Turned Farm Around

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with a registered Holstein herd and with the feeding philosophy that all his cows needed was a little bit of grain. This resulted in breeding difficulties and loss of body condition. He decided to purchase a herd of Jerseys in order to begin cross breeding and producing cows that would be better grazers.

However, he didn't get the results David had hoped for. The Jerseys and their cross-bred progeny lacked the production he expected and had a temperament that he found unacceptable.

David's current thought is to stay with Holsteins but to provide more supplementation to them. He aims for the cows to get 50 percent of their dry matter intake from pasture with the balance coming from 13 pounds of shell corn, 5 pounds corn silage, and 5 pounds of soy hulls. He is also selecting Holstein sires that are smaller in stature, have deep bellies, and are high in components. While he had been pursuing a spring seasonal herd, David now has a calving season in the fall and one in the spring with roughly half the herd calving in each.

Irrigation Challenges

In the last few years, David has experimented with irrigation to extend the pasture season. A creek runs along the border of his farm and provides an excellent source for irrigation. In 2001, he purchased a traveling hose irrigator and used it on a limited basis. But he started too late and wasn't able to graze through a dry spell as he hoped. This past summer was even drier and he started irrigating at the start of the drought. While he was able to continue grazing for most of the summer, David is now having second thoughts about the wisdom of irrigating as opposed to purchasing forage to replace pasture.

Irrigating required a lot of extra labor, tractor use, and headaches this past year and made it harder to accomplish other jobs in a timely manner. Counting the use of a tractor on the irrigation pump, a tractor to

move the irrigator from paddock to paddock, his labor, the depreciation on the irrigation equipment, and fuel and repairs, David calculates it cost him nearly \$25,000 to irrigate for 120 days this past year. He feels that is roughly the same cost as purchasing the same amount of dairy quality forage need to replace the droughty pasture and is seriously considering whether to irrigate or purchase forage in the future.

Measuring Dry Matter

David has also been interested in measuring and improving the amount of pasture dry matter that his cows get from pasture. When he first started grazing, he didn't have a good handle on how to judge the amount of pasture to allocate to the cows. He decided to purchase an Allistair George electronic capacitance meter to help him measure the pasture dry matter. The meter cost \$1,200 and allowed David to quickly measure the dry matter in each paddock and put together a rotation plan. While he relied on the meter quite heavily in his first few years using pasture, David has not used it much in the last few and feels that the meter allowed him to train his eyes.

A more recent technique he has used to increase dry matter intake on pasture is to clip the paddocks before the cows enter them. This past summer, David used a rotary mower to mow down paddocks 24 hours before the cows entered them. This greatly cut down on refusals and increased the amount of pasture the cows were consuming. It took about 45 minutes to cut down each four-acre paddock and he found that cows preferred the cut forage to any that was left standing near the fence row.

The Bottom Line

Grazing has turned the Surprenant farm around financially, from just breaking even to making money. In the mid to late 1980s as a confinement dairy, David's net profit/loss from his Schedule F form

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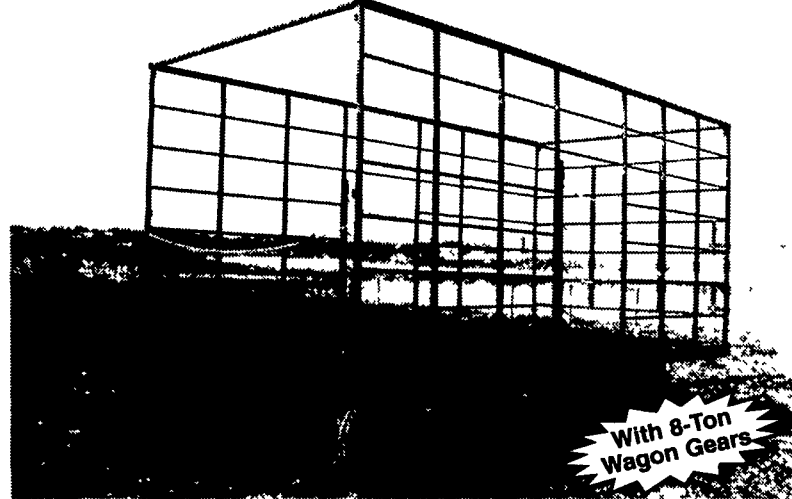
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