

Tim Fritz
PFGC President

The weather certainly has been a challenge lately. The summer of 2002 was hot and bone dry. The fall of 2002 was wet and cold. Winter lasted too long and this spring was cool, wet and that yellow thing in the sky was absent most of the spring. Summer has started warm and sunny but who knows what the rest of the year will bring.

It is very obvious to me that a diversity of forages with flexible harvesting systems are needed. This spring dry hay was impossible to make, baleage and haylage were difficult, and grazing required excellent management including improved lanes. Irish weather required Irish forage harvesting. I visited a farm on a pasture walk in Maryland that for their surplus spring growth was using the Irish system of direct-cut silage in which the forage (ryegrass in this case) was flail-chopped, stacked on a pile, covered with plastic, and the air vacuumed out.

Hopefully, this weather will not be repeated soon but some lessons should be learned. Don't put all your forages in one system. Flexibility and diversity of species are critical to maintain a supply of high quality forages. Last summer BMR (brown midrib) sorghum sudangrass and forage sorghum shone, and this spring ryegrass did very well after a rough start.

Most people already know how to make high quality hay and haylage. The bugs are being worked out of balage especially with the advent of inline wrappers. The Irish direct-cut system is usually not needed but is worth exploring. Grazing is in its early stages of adoption and, with low commodity prices, needs to be incorporated into mainstream agriculture for eastern agriculture to thrive.

With good management grazing can be a very profitable way to make milk and meat! The stored forage systems are needed to help manage surpluses and shortages of forages. If you are ready to join in the grazing game, learn from others' mistakes and do some research before you jump into grazing. The learning curve is steep, but for most folks it is very enjoyable. But don't think you will be laying around watching the cows (or other grazing livestock) do all the work for you! This system requires management and is a skill that may be essential for financial survival. The remainder of my comments will focus on grazing systems and in particular as it relates to dairy. But the ideas are relevant for other animal species as well.

While grazing, the cows are working for you in harvesting forages at their prime. You are the boss sending your workers to harvest the crop. The trick is to keep the workers busy as much as possible in the right field. In other words, the crop should be at its prime most of the time and there should be enough of crop available for the cow to harvest. It really isn't that hard to do, and when you fall short you can always feed a little stored feed. Isn't that what stored feed was invented for? Also when you don't have enough cow workers to harvest the forage, bring out the machines to get it harvested in a timely fashion. Mistakes will be made, but thankfully pastures are very forgiving. After a few cycles of grazing you and your cows will catch on.

Grazing works for one simple reason: cows, as ruminants, are made to be on grass. Their four stomachs are naturally adapted to forage consumption, not heavy amounts of grain which is often fed on many farms. You, the boss must be like a good shepherd and put the cows (or sheep in the case of the shepherd) on good pasture. When the system is running efficiently, the financial benefits come from several factors:

- Less capital overhead;
- Low cull rates/more cattle sales;
- More milk sold per farm worker; and

• Lower feed costs through premium forage quality.

Here are the key components for making the system work: the Fence, the Lanes, the Water System, the Crop, the Land Base, the Cows, and the Manager.

The Fence is essential for making managed grazing work. Its primary purpose on a managed system is to keep the cows out of the Crop which has not reached its optimum harvest stage. Cows should not be on paddocks longer than three days or new shoots may be grazed off weakening the plant and resulting in lower yields. Ideally, a new break (additional fresh pasture) should be given two to three times a day for intensively managed pastures. For most dairies, single strand fencing is all you need. A rule of thumb for paddock size (area where cows are grazing) is 40,000-80,000 pounds of animal per day per acre depending on pasture density and supplemental feeding levels.

The Lane is essential for getting the herd to the right paddock without destroying too much pasture. Heavily used lanes should be improved to move cows to and from paddocks during marginal weather conditions. Improved lanes range from simple crowning of dirt all the way to a

narrow strip of concrete. But don't spend too much money up front until you know where the problems will be and that you are committed to making the system work. Because lanes will not grow a crop, I prefer lanes that are narrow. Equipment lanes

“Grazing is very similar to the game of chess. A lot of moves must be made to succeed, but there are many ways to succeed.”

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ideally should be kept separate. Fences making up the lanes should be designed for flexibility of cow movement and equipment crossing (easily dropped or moved.)

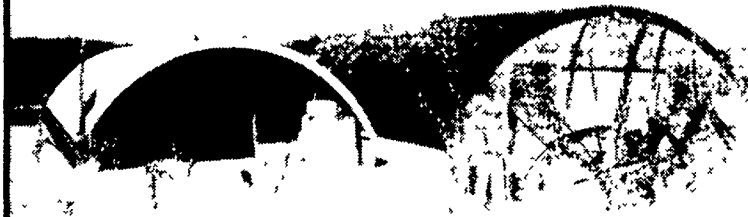
The Water System: Cows obviously need clean fresh water to produce milk. However, this component is a little controversial. Since lush grass contains about 80 percent water less water is needed for a

grazing herd than a herd consuming drier rations. Most recommend a pressurized water system that relies on above ground 160-psi black plastic piping that follows the lane system to carry water to each paddock. Ideally, it is looped with individual legs going to remote paddocks. Portable tubs with full flow valves are connected by couplers and are moved to wherever the herd is moved. In addition to water in each paddock, lots of water should be available when the herd comes in from pasture. Cows drink most of their water at this time. For large herds, water storage tanks are very important.

The Crop is essential for providing high quality forage to the cow. Some folks in the grazing world simply recommend planting fence posts and let the cows harvest whatever comes. Most, however, have figured out that you reap what you sow. This is not to say that native pastures can not be productive with good management. I rarely recommend that old pastures be plowed under for a startup operation. Only after the full system is up and running and the old pasture falls short in some way should renovation take place. A

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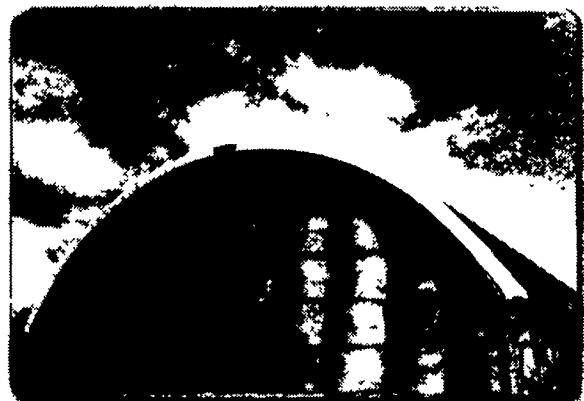
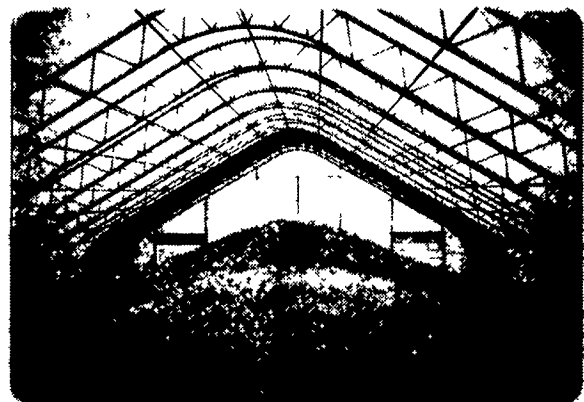
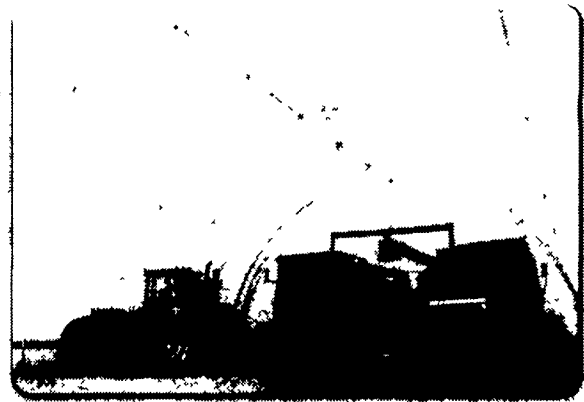


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