

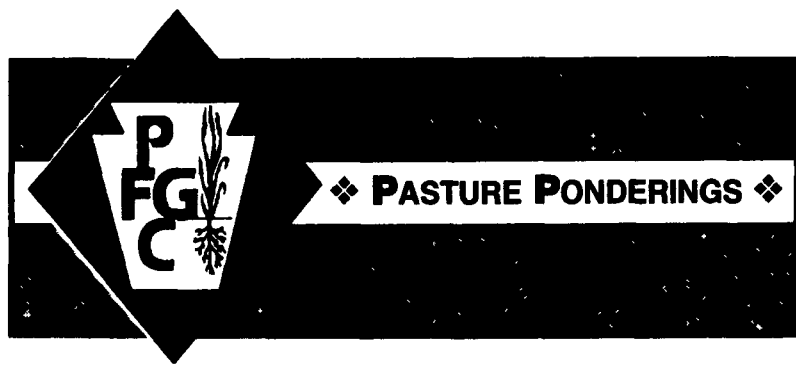
Special Report

(Continued from Page E6)

60 percent of our research in New Zealand and the level of funding is about to rise to approximately 30 percent in Ireland.

Conclusion

There is huge potential for pasture-based, grazing dairy farms in the northeastern U.S. However, although you can learn from the obvious mistakes that other countries have made (e.g. over-investment in unnecessary capital items, supplementing well-fed cows to "balance the diet", etc.), you will not be able to directly transfer their system into your region. Pick the most appropriate management practices and research them within your system.



Duane E. Pysher
NRCS Grassland
Management Specialist

I continue along on my road to recovery from the stroke I had in April. I am maintaining contact with the NRCS staff as well as the latest in grazing as time and health allows. I keep myself current and knowledgeable about the things happening at NRCS.

One of the newest programs to come out of the 2002 Farm Bill is the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). This is a very important program for grassland farmers in the U.S. and I would like to try and explain some of the main points of the program for those who are unfamiliar with it.

The GRP is a voluntary program that you can sign up for that allows a landowner to restore and protect grasslands. At the same time that you are protecting your grasslands you can

be grazing them. Grazing operations are supported by the program as well as plant and animal biodiversity.

If you are like me, by now you are saying what does Congress hope to get from this investment? Well, they are simply concerned with conserving and protecting two million acres of grasslands.

I contacted Jana Malot of the Natural Resources Conservation Service in McConnellsburg to find out more about the GRP. Jana is the state manager of the GRP program and she provided me with some details and the philosophy behind the program. She indicated that in Pennsylvania there is a move to commit grassland to this program so as to preserve the better soil types containing those grasslands. In other words, we just do not just want your junk land. Jana stressed that NRCS wants to manage these grasslands for good grass cover regardless of whether it is being grazed, hayed or just plain grass cover. She is not looking for weeds, but grasses. Wildlife enhancement is the second objective of the program. Grassland preservation is the primary goal.

You as a landowner can enter into an agreement with the U.S. government and offer your grasslands for an easement (permanent or 30 years) or a long-term rental (10, 15, 20 and 30 years).

In addition to these two agreement types a restoration agreement is also offered. The restoration agreement becomes part of the land agreement and can provide funding of the restoration costs of the grasslands. In other words, the government is helping by providing money to improve the grassland functions of the land. In 2003 in Pennsylvania only seedlings are being cost-shared. However, this may change in 2004.

Does this seem too good to be true? Well, there is more good news. All of the enrollment options that I listed allow a producer to graze the land using common grazing practices that maintain the viability of the grassland. Haying, mowing and harvest of seed are subject to restrictions during the nesting season. The GRP prohibits the production of crops (excluding hay), fruit trees, and vineyards that would disturb the soil surface. Many of these practices would be controlled by what is contained in a farmer's conservation plan.

Isn't this a breathe of fresh air? Just think, a producer has land that the government will take control of and pay them for, from a minimum 10-year rental up to a permanent easement. In addition, the landowner can graze the land or make hay subject to the conservation or grazing plan limitations.

I think I hear someone saying: "Sure and they only want blocks of 1,000 acres so the big guys get the break again."

I want you to know that blocks of 40 or more contiguous acres are eligible to be enrolled in the program. These acres must be private lands and in grass.

The only adjusted gross income limit is if you have exceeded \$2.5 million in income over the three tax years preceeding the application year. Now, I know most of you will have trouble enrolling because of adjusted gross income. Okay, maybe you won't have trouble, but I suggest anyway that you check out the rules and exemptions affecting eligibility and program enrollment.

I suggest that you contact your local USDA Agricultural Service Center to find out more about the program and hopefully enroll in it while you are there. I think you will be happy that you did. I have tried to give some of the basics of eligibility and enrollment. The folks at the Ag Center will be able to give you the entire rundown on the program and how you will fit into it.

If you would like information on grazing or the GRP you can contact me by e-mail at HYPERLINKmailto:duane.pysher@pa.usda.gov; telephone me at (717) 237-2221 or write to me at home at 320 N. Walnut St., Wernersville, PA, 19565.

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