

AS THE HERD TURNS

Area farmers find successful chapter with rotational grazing

By Tony Ends
Gazette Staff

Roger Johnson's broad smile says a lot about his farming business these days. And rotational grazing is helping him stay happy.

Johnson, 39, farms with his wife, Cheri, in a partnership with his father, Arnold.

He started out working for wages for his dad in 1978 and now farms a second 230-acre place that his father bought in 1987. The farm's just outside of Juda, west of Brodhead in Green County.

About 75 acres of the farm is in pasture—about an acre per head of dairy cattle, counting Johnson's heifers. And Johnson is in his fourth season of pasturing his dairy herd.

"I started out the traditional way of feeding the cows through the silo or bale. Everyone back then told farmers to put up silos and keep the cows confined to make more money," Johnson said.

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Rick Phillips/Gazette Staff

Roger Johnson moves his cows out to pasture after a recent morning milking. From April to September Johnson's cows primarily feed themselves, grazing down sections of a pasture a strip at a time up to a movable fence. To keep the grazing uniform, the fence is moved ahead of the cows as they finish eating each section.

Other advantages to grazing have hit home with Johnson the past three years of trying this system of feeding cattle.

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Grazing is not for high-debt farmer

then told farmers to put up silos and keep the cows confined to make more money," Johnson said.

"We're not getting rich by rotational grazing, but we're making a living and paying off debt, and we're buying a little equipment every year."

Johnson's cows are not confined in a dirt lot and fed entirely from stored feed, as many dairy cows are these days.

From April to September the cows primarily feed themselves, grazing down sections of a pasture a strip at a time up to a movable fence.

To keep the grazing uniform, the fence is moved ahead of the cows as they finish eating each section and are ready to move on. A back wire is brought up from behind to keep the cows moving forward across the pasture and to let their forage recuperate from grazing.

Resting sections of his pasture in this way renews the grass plants, avoids erosion and stems the advance of weeds. It lets the pasture rejuvenate itself on a continual basis.

Hay is made available to the cows when they come down to the barn for milking, and the cows are fed grain while they're giving milk.

But Johnson won't be trying to fill a silo the first crop this growing season; it will sit empty until fall.

"Now the cows leave the hay silage in the trough near the barn and head off toward the pasture after milking. They know what's out there in that pasture, and they want to get out there," Johnson said.

"Grass is high in energy and protein; the cows love to get out there. When I first went to grazing, at first I had to call them to get them to go out there to pasture. But now they know what to expect; they know there's good grass out there. I open the gate, and they're gone."

Other advantages to grazing have hit home with Johnson the past three years of trying this system of feeding cattle.

His herd's health has improved dramatically, and he doesn't see the vet as often.

Breeding, which used to be a bit of a problem, has changed, too. "I bred 30 cows by insemination last year, and 23 were pregnant on the first service. That's about 75 percent, a percentage I never used to get," he said.

Johnson has had to shift his focus from raising feed by row crops to learning to manage his pasture, but he doesn't regret it.

"It takes a while to learn to read the grass, to know how much to give them at certain times. But it's not difficult; I taught one of my sons to do this, and he can do it pretty well now. I can send him up to check on moving the fences, and he knows what to do," Johnson said.

"There's not a whole lot of investment here. We used some old fencing and polywire on a reel. It took me about 20 minutes to move a fence today.

"I have water valves in different areas, where I can shut off each section. I use these cam lock connectors that make attaching hoses really easy."

Johnson's 1920s era barn has just been remodeled, too, in a stall-widening project with new feeding managers and 44 stanchions.

He's milking 52 cows now and should be milking 60 by the end of June. The average yield of his cows is 19,000 pounds per year, more than 3,000 above the state average. And the average age of his herd is 4.5 years, again probably almost a year beyond the average age for most dairy herds.

Turn to HERD/3C



Rick Phillips/Gazette Staff
Johnson sets up a temporary electric fence to graze section off a piece of a field for his cows to graze in for the day.

Want more information?

Read all about it: To obtain a copy of Pastures for Profit—a guide to rotational grazing that describes plant growth and patterns, steps to improve productivity, animal needs and paddock layouts—contact the Lafayette County Extension Service in Darlington, 608 776-4820.

See for yourself: To tag along with members of the Dane and Green County Grazers Group on a pasture walk, contact Bert Paris at 608 424-6396.

Turn to FARMER/3C

Grazing is not for high-debt farmer

Grazing to city folks may conjure up a sleepy pastoral image.

Gentle animals in quiet pastures, munching away on lush grass. The tinkle of cow bells, the lowing of cattle. It's the perfect picture of a simple way of life in the country.

In a business so ravaged by fluctuating prices, increasing costs, pressures from development, however, this picture may seem a cruel joke.

And to Wisconsin farmers, who watch 2,000 to 3,000 of their number quit the business every year, the joke's not at all funny.

Despite these conflicting images, rotational grazing of livestock is proving to be a lifesaver—and business saver—to an increasing number of farmers.

And using pasturing systems to increase profits is even helping a number of young farmers have the courage to enter the business.

"It's been picking up steam the past seven or eight years," said John Cockrell, with the Agriculture Extension Service in Lafayette County. "Each year, we're seeing more and more farmers going into it.

"Rotational grazing does take a lot of management, but it is a fairly low-cost way of milking cows," Cockrell said.

With feed costs mounting to as much as 65 percent of total livestock production, rotational grazing can take a big bite out of high conventional costs in raising forage.

It does this by taking a farmer—in large measure—off the tractor and away from row crop and green chop production. And it sets him to work in pastures, managing the growth and productivity of legume and forage grasses.

Idle cows come out of confinement by this method and are put to work in the pasture, too. They harvest their own food, fertilize fields and cut costs in equipment, fertilizer, pesticide and labor.

One dairy farmer—in a Wisconsin Rural Development Center study, reported in an extension service publication—demonstrated the results.

The farmer saved an average \$130 per head in annual feed costs between 1987 and 1990 by using rotational grazing instead of green chopping.

The same farmer cut his expense in labor from 8 hours per acre per year to 3 hours per acre per year.