



GRAZING AS A NEW MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

By Cheryl Cesario, Grazing Outreach Professional

Successful grazing systems develop when there is farmer involvement in the planning process. Having a plan is important and needs to be built around the goals of the farmer.

Jonathan and Maryann Connor of Providence Dairy in Addison successfully implemented a new grazing plan this year. The Connors operate a well-managed Holstein herd, produce high quality milk, and they participate in the Ben & Jerry's Caring Dairy program with the St. Albans Co-Op. Over their five years in the program, Jonathan and Maryann were able to focus on energy efficiency, animal care and water quality improvements. For the Connors, grazing management was the next logical area to explore.

One of their goals was to save money by reducing machine operation costs associated with the tillage, planting and harvesting of annual crops. Jonathan wanted to seed down some of his corn ground near the barn and

convert it to high quality pasture so that all acreage closest to the barn could be grazed. Another goal was to reduce the herd's cull rate by promoting herd health with cows on grass. To address these goals, we began planning a grazing system from scratch. While it would have been very feasible to fence the entire farm for grazing,



Jonathan (above) and Maryann Connor of Providence Dairy in Addison implemented their new grazing plan in 2017.

we started conservatively. We chose enough acres near the barn to provide 30% of the cows' daily dry matter intake from pasture. When we were done, we had a plan that included high tensile fence, temporary poly-wire fence, animal laneways, water pipeline, water tubs, frost seeding on the hay fields, and "forage and biomass planting" (the NRCS term for seeding down annual crop land).

The Connors grazing project was funded by NRCS and last fall they got the needed infrastructure in place. As an added bonus, the timing of the NRCS contract was such that we were able to capitalize on the availability of a Dairy Improvement Grant funded by Ehrmann Commonwealth, through the Connors' milk buyer, the St. Albans Co-Op. This matching grant provided additional funds to put towards their grazing infrastructure.





When the pastures began to grow in May of this year, Jonathan and Maryann were faced with the challenge of turning 90 large Holstein cows loose from their tie-stalls. The cows had to navigate across the gutter, keep their footing going down the alleyway, and get out the door. To minimize chaos, the Connors started small by turning out 27 cows, then increasing the number gradually, until the entire herd was going out to graze. In their system, cows graze during the day only, going out after morning milking at approximately 9:00 a.m. and coming in around 3:30 p.m. for the evening shift. Jonathan uses single strand polywire with fiberglass posts to give the cows a new strip for each day's grazing.

The wet weather trend that began in early May presented some challenges, as the farm is on heavy clay soil. He was holding the cows on wet days so they wouldn't punch up the pastures when the ground was soft. The sporadic nature of cows going out or staying in presented some challenges with keeping the feed ra-

tion consistent and was a bit confusing for the cows trying to get used to a new routine. With over five inches of rain in May, it was certainly a tough way to start a new grazing endeavor. However, the farmers made good decisions, and trusted their intuition to preserve pasture quality for the long term.

Throughout the summer, Jonathan had to balance when to turn the cows out, trying to minimize mud issues around watering areas and gate openings. Cows were going into pastures when the grass was 8 to 10 inches tall, and what they weren't eating, they were trampling into the ground. This

resulted in a nice mat that protected the soil during wet conditions and minimized damage.

So here we are, almost through the first grazing season on this farm. There have been challenges and frustrations, but Jonathan says, "While it is more work, it just feels right having the cows outside instead of chained up. I love seeing them outside eating grass. I think they are healthier and definitely more mobile."

Read more about this project in my three-part series in *On Pasture*: www.onpasture.com/2017/08/07/dairy-cows-head-to-pasture-for-the-first-time-on-providence-farm/

NEW GRAZING CLASS!

Join our four-session class to learn new grazing practices and develop a grazing plan that meets NRCS standards. Free of charge, and includes *The Art and Science of Grazing* by Sarah Flack. Upcoming dates in November/December.

INFO: CHERYL CESARIO 802-388-4969 EXT. 346