



## FOCUSING ON EFFECTIVENESS WITH GRASS-FED BEEF

By Cheryl Cesario, Grazing Outreach Professional

Dylan Barrows runs 75 head of beef cattle on the Ferrisburgh farm he operates with his grandfather Lawrence Gebo. Dylan is the fourth generation on his family's farm, which has been in operation for approximately 100 years. Dylan manages 400 acres in Ferrisburgh and Waltham. Primarily cropped for hay, cattle were brought onto the farm about eight years ago to help with soil fertility. In 2016, Dylan enrolled in UVM Extension's six-week class to write his own nutrient management plan. He says the class made clear, "We were taking credits by harvesting hay, but only returning maybe a quarter of those." Soil testing also showed which nutrients were needed and where, so he knew how to make economical fertility investments.



Lawrence Gebo (left) and Dylan Barrows (right) on their century-old family farm in Ferrisburgh.

With that knowledge, Dylan attended UVM Extension's four-part grazing class where farmers learn in-depth grazing principles, and have a hand in developing their own plans. This program is part of a two year Sustainable Agriculture and Research Education (SARE) grant that combines classroom education with on-site consulting visits. By the last day of class, Dylan had a completed grazing plan he was able to deliver to NRCS. The resulting contract included practices such as high tensile perimeter fence, temporary polywire fencing, water pipeline and water tubs so that he could expand his pasture acreage.

The class also showed him how he could intensify his grazing management. Dylan says, "I used to do four to five days in bigger paddocks. It was working, but I saw

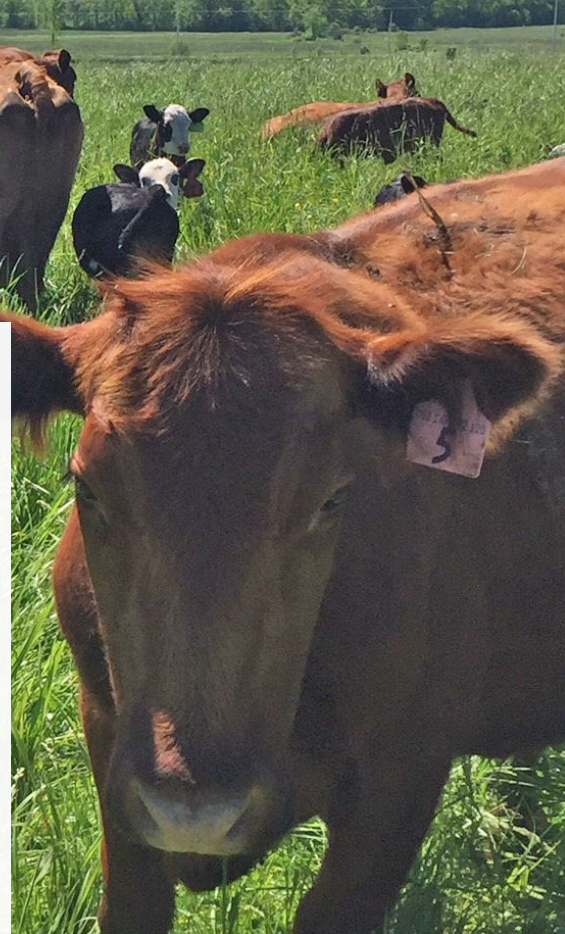
what I could gain with daily animal moves." Currently Dylan is moving animals one to two times per day. What is his response to people who say this type of management involves too much labor? "If you have time to feed them hay, you have time to move them. It takes me 20 minutes and I would be checking them anyway." He adds, "The cows look better and the calves grow better."

Dylan is using a grazing chart to plan. He says the chart not only documents what he has done, but allows him to stay ahead of the animals and reduces his stress. "I don't have to plan my life around the animals." Now he plans around his grass availability.

One of the biggest turning points for Dylan was completing the nationally renowned Ranching for Profit School in February 2019. This is a seven-day intensive program focused on economic and financial principles with strategies to identify profit and increase effectiveness. He says of the school, "It was a brick to the forehead." What were the biggest takeaways?

1. If you are in the cow/calf business, you are in the cull cow business. Develop those markets and find ways to reduce cow depreciation.
2. Calve in sync with nature. Shift the calving season so that cows are on an uphill plane of nutrition before calving.
3. Make less hay to graze more animals. The increased carrying capacity will outweigh the benefit of making your own hay.

AND one more message that is just as important, "Don't worry about what your neighbor is doing." As Dylan makes some large shifts in his management, he has found that calving on pasture provides many benefits, including fewer health issues for animals and less stress for people. He wants the brood cows to be on grass for at least two weeks



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before calving begins. The idea is to mimic the cycle of wild herbivores, working with nature rather than against it.

Last year, even with the drought, Dylan achieved 157 days on pasture without hay supplementation. His goal is to get to 200 days. A recent visit to grazer Greg Judy's farm in Missouri inspired him to get there. Seeing Greg's system, "Gave me the confidence," Dylan says. Last winter Dylan began experimenting with grazing cows on stockpiled pasture forage and gained an additional 10 days without supplementation. "What we grazed down in winter was the first grass to turn green in the spring." Dylan can see if he plans his pasture forage inventory right, he can meet his 200-day goal this year. After all, Dylan says, "The longer you graze them, the more money in your pocket."

Grazing questions?  
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