

# FSK-HAINES FARM: FLEXIBILITY IN GRAZING MANAGEMENT PAYS DIVIDENDS

By Cheryl Cesario, Grazing Outreach Professional

One of the highlights of my job as a grazing specialist is seeing how farmers adopt new practices and evolve with them over time. Seeing success stories on the ground is very inspiring. I first met Hilda Fisk-Haines and Steve Haines in early summer 2013. Hilda and Steve operate the Fisk-Haines Farm in Danby, Vt., which Hilda's father originally purchased in 1951. They milk 80 Holstein cows, ship their milk through Dairy Farmers of America (DFA), and manage approximately 250 acres.

On that first visit six years ago, they asked me to come down and discuss some ideas on rotational grazing, which they had begun experimenting with. They were moving cows between a handful of pasture areas covering about 20 acres. Looking back Hilda says, "I did not understand the logistics. I was doing it on a wing and a prayer."

Each year we would check in, and each year Hilda was adding more acres and more paddocks into the rotation. By doing this, she was able to increase the recovery time for her pastures to grow back and increase their dry matter yields. By the 2018 grazing season, the Fisk-Haines Farm had 60 acres incorporated into the pasture rotation. When I drove up to the farm late last summer, I was excited to see temporary polywire fencing around many of their hay fields. Hilda says, "The polywire fence I can do myself and run it the way I want, changing the paddocks mid-season. I love the flexibility of the poly."

Before the 2018 grazing season began, Hilda participated in UVM Extension's four-part grazing class where farmers not only learn in-depth grazing principles, but also 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. "In the pasture class, I picked up stuff that made a difference this year," says Hilda. However, as far as implementation goes, it is her daily attention to both the plants and the animals that has been critical to her success.

Hilda and Steve invested in a water system in 2017. While that increased their cost, they said the payback was quick and worth it. It allowed them to bring water to more areas of the farm, increasing the ability to graze more acres and adding to the efficiency of the grazing system. Every investment they have made - from new polywire fence, to water pipe, to frost seeding - has been done independently without cost-share money. "There hasn't been a year we haven't done something new," says Hilda.

What has been their motivation to do all this? It's simple, Hilda says, "Money." Then adding, "This is the cheapest milk I've ever made." By comparing their winter ration to their grazing season ration, it is easy to see why. From early May through October, Hilda and Steve are able to reduce their per-week feed ration by 5,600 pounds of grain, 22,400 pounds of corn silage, and 8,400 pounds of haylage over at least a 24-week period. In some years, it has extended up to 28 weeks, as they gradually increase supplementation into the winter. When we put values on these feed sources, we estimate a savings of about \$1,830 per week, or just under \$44,000 over a 24-week period. Every additional week the cows graze into the fall will add to this total.

By comparing the winter and summer rations, we calculated that the cows obtained approximately 63% of their daily dry matter needs from pasture this past season and their milk production (average 70 pounds) has maintained through it all. Hilda says, "It has changed our breakeven point. If we hadn't done this, I don't think we could have withstood the price drop."



**WE ESTIMATE A SAVINGS OF \$44,000 OVER 24 WEEKS**

As far as animal health goes, Hilda reports that her annual vet bill is now one third of what it had been in the past. "Our animals are healthier. They breed back better, their feet are stronger," she says. So what is next on the horizon? Grazing cover crops. Although they are now planting 20 acres less corn as a result of their improved grazing, Hilda figures if she grazes the winter rye cover crop on her corn fields, she can add an extra two weeks on the front end of the grazing season. For this farm, that is an easy decision. It's money in the bank.

Would you like help implementing a grazing system or improving your current system? Contact Cheryl at 802-388-4969 ext. 346 or [cheryl.cesario@uvm.edu](mailto:cheryl.cesario@uvm.edu). We are now finishing the last of our grazing classes in our two-year grant effort, but we can still help you on an individual basis.



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