

GRAZING ADJUSTMENTS AT ISLANDACRES FARM

By Cheryl Cesario, Grazing Outreach Professional

Adopting a new management practice on the farm can be a daunting and stressful endeavor. Change is difficult, especially when those changes come with financial risks. When farmers consider grazing as a new management practice, or want to change or improve their existing system, there is often a lot of planning work. And even the best-laid plans need continual adjustment and improvement.

Steve and Kelly Robinson of Islandacres Farm in South Hero are experiencing this first hand, as they move into the second year of grazing on their dairy farm. The Robinsons run the farm with their sons, Patrick and Anthony, and milk a herd of 75 Holstein and Jersey cows. Steve saw grazing as a way to mitigate the risk of annual crops. After two years of poor corn yields, Steve called me in 2013 and said, “Okay, what do I need to do to start grazing these cows?”

After working with Extension to develop a grazing plan, the Robinsons received an NRCS EQIP (Natural Resources Conservation Service Environmental Quality Incentives Program) contract to install fence, water pipeline and animal laneways as part of their grazing system. Additionally, one of the most critical contract items was seeding down approximately 60 acres of corn land that had been in annual crops for over 20 years.

OKAY, WHAT DO I NEED TO DO TO START GRAZING THESE COWS?

For a larger grazing contract, the implementation period can take several years. Sometimes delayed implementation is due to unforeseen circumstances. In this case, pasture grasses and clovers that were initially planted in 2014 were almost entirely winter-killed going into the next season and had to be replanted, setting the project back a year. All fencing went in over a two-year period and laneways started, but the Robinsons were then sidelined by a larger farm project when they had a complete breakdown of their gutter cleaner and manure

transfer system in May 2017. This coincided with the start of their first grazing season. The one upside was that cows were now spending more time out of the barn, which reduced the burden of keeping the gutters clean. Overall, the first season on grass was a success, with milk production maintaining and a slight decrease in grain costs. Pastures looked nice late in the season with little to no sign of overgrazing.

By fall 2017, the manure handling situation was fixed and we started looking ahead to grazing system changes we could make in 2018. The previous year, cows moved through fixed paddocks with their water source in the barnyard. One issue with having paddocks that stay the same size all season is that it is a “one size fits all” strategy that is

not always the right size. Depending on the pasture growth, a fixed paddock is either too big early on or too small later in the season. Also, having a water source a greater distance from the grazing animals promotes herd mentality; when one decides to go get a drink all the other animals decide to go with their friends and before you know it, there they are standing around and huddled up around the tub instead of doing what they should be doing – grazing.

The 2018 strategy is focused on variable paddock sizes based on estimated dry matter yields in the field and coupled with variable recovery periods before the animals grazed those areas again. The essential idea is breaking up those fixed elements in order to account for the daily variability that makes up a complex and dynamic system. Steve is now setting up a new paddock each day based on how much feed the cows need for a given grazing period. He is also incrementally cutting back on stored feeds in the bunk so they are going out to pasture each morning hungrier and doing a better job grazing down what is in front of them. Pasture quality is looking great with a diversity of high quality grasses and clovers making for a dense stand.

The Robinsons are seeing the results in the bulk tank as well, with production early in the grazing season going up a couple hundred pounds per day. After some fine-





tuning on the ration, Steve sent me a text with a photo that showed a perfectly grazed down paddock. His caption? “Yeah, maybe there is something to this pasture thing.”

This summer their goal is to complete the water system and laneways, while continuing to monitor paddock sizes and recovery periods. The Robinsons keep a grazing chart in the barn so everyone sees exactly where the cows are grazing and where they have been. The chart also readily shows if the rotation starts to get too fast for the pasture growth, allowing the farmers to make a decision on whether they should take the animals off pasture for a period so it can recover and not be overgrazed.

Islandacres is a well-managed farm that has won quality milk awards for over 30 years from their buyer, St. Albans Co-Op. Recently the farm also became a member of the Ben & Jerry’s Caring Dairy program. Caring Dairy

provides additional premiums for farmers who achieve designated “sustainability indicators” such as energy efficiency, animal care, water quality and soil health improvements. Steve sees grazing as a way to alleviate cropping risk but also ensure

that the farm can continue with the next generation - another important component of sustainability.

Most successful grazing systems develop from farmer involvement in the planning process. Another helpful component is to have ongoing assistance from a service provider or another farmer who can answer

questions and share ideas. Last fall, as part of a Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant, we began offering a four-part grazing management course for farmers to learn about the benefits and challenges of grazing from both economic and environmental perspectives. Each farmer developed a plan specific to their own operation based on their farm goals, and each participant received a copy of Sarah Flack’s book *The Art and Science of Grazing* as a course textbook and helpful future reference. Outside of the class, the ongoing one-on-one farm visits provide additional support as new practices and strategies are implemented on the ground.

Contact Cheryl with your grazing questions: 802-388-4969 ext. 346 or cheryl.cesario@uvm.edu.

Fall/Winter 2018 Grazing Classes

Middlebury: October 18, 25, November 1, 8
Poultney: November 27, December 4, 11, 18

Classes cover a range of topics on plant, soil and animal health and include planning and record keeping techniques. Individuals will develop a grazing plan that could be used as a basis for NRCS funding and farm planning. This class is designed for farmers who already own livestock, who would like to or are considering a transition to grazing, or are trying to improve their current grazing system to optimize pasture production and quality.

Info & Registration: \$40 includes Sarah Flack’s book *The Art and Science of Grazing*. blog.uvm.edu/cvcrops/grazing-class

WATER QUALITY FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

This program helps Vermont farms assess financial capacity and budget for infrastructure projects. From manure pits, barnyard projects, milk house waste and silage leachate; capture systems to dairy improvement grant and water quality grant-writing assistance, our consultants can help to analyze your cash flow and make recommendations on funding your project. Last year over 30 farms sought assistance, with some using management teams to develop strategic plans around their projects. Others sought help with farm transition and exit planning, as well as sale of land parcels to area conservation districts.

If you are interested in this program, contact Tony Kitsos in St. Albans, 802-524-6501 ext. 440 or tony.kitsos@uvm.edu.

