

Transition to Grazing

Long-Term Change to Part-Year Grazing and Part-Year Confinement

The following is an obvious major recommendation to change to a system that allows production of milk at much lower cost during the period when most feed is from grazing. Milk production will drop off during this period but based on substantial experience, the reduction in milk production will be far less than the reduction in the cost of production, resulting in equal or usually greater net return (profit) from milking the same number of cows.

Two major environmental management gains will occur with this system.

- 1) The amount of silage needed to feed animals in confinement will be cut in half, thus allowing longer rotations, more dependence on legumes/alfalfa and less corn-barley double crops with two manure applications.
- 2) The amount of manure captured in confinement will be cut in half so present storage capacity should be adequate for almost a full year, allowing most manure to be applied in the spring for use by summer annual grain and silage crops. Manure will be distributed by the animals through the intensive rotational grazing system. Limited late summer/fall application may be required and this can be performed at low application rates during late summer-early fall to pasture fields that will be intensively rotationally grazed later in the fall. Care still must be taken to avoid excess P and manure applications should be planned to reduce and/or maintain all fields at optimum P levels (with P saturation levels below 20%).

The transition would include:

- a. Convert appropriate acreage to an intensive rotational grazing area capable of providing forage through grazing during periods of maximum grass production (spring and fall)
- b. Rotationally graze cows as primary/sole feed source on these pastures from about March 15 to June 15 and from September 15 to Dec 15
- c. Confine milk cows to feed dry pack barns during summer and winter (no pasturing)
- d. Calculate total silage need during months of confinement
- e. Develop a longer term rotation, with minimum needed corn silage, by increasing alfalfa acreage or grow sorghum, sudan/sudex mix, etc. as summer silage crops with recommended nutrients applied as manure. Plant fall cover crops, without manure application, and harvest for silage (if needed) making sure that a six inch stubble is left.
- f. Use appropriate sized fields as pasture for dry cows and heifers for about nine months per year. Hay can be harvested from some of these fields in spring, if sufficient forage is produced on remaining fields to support heifers and dry cows.

g. Retire additional stream-side areas, eroded spots, wet areas and other sensitive/low productivity areas as possible if you determine excess silage or grass can be produced using the mixed grazing and confinement production system.

h. Substantial financial and technical assistance should be available and requested from NRCS, SWCD and FSA. Extension can assist with crop management transition.

i. WSI will work with producers in quantifying the potential reduction in pounds of N and P moving off-farm.

