

# Farmers Share Ideas To Boost Milk Profits At Springfield Dairy Grazing Conference



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**MONETT, MO.**

**M**ike Meier was going to shut down the 100-year-old family dairy farm, until he learned about seasonal-dairy grazing. Conventional dairy farming was time consuming and not profitable. He planned to raise beef cows.

Meier told his story to repeated busloads of visitors. His was one of three Ozark farm stops for 266 visitors attending the Dairy Grazing Conference at the Springfield Expo Center.

Meier said his pasture-based seasonal milking herd of 110 cows makes more money and takes less work than the old-style dairy. The difference? He feeds less grain rations, and the cows do the forage harvesting. Most of the feed comes from small grazing paddocks.

"In 2008 the cows were not milked on the farm for the first time in 100 years," Meier said. He quit the everyday milking chore for a two-month winter break. He began the shift after his father retired in 2000.

On a pasture walk with visitors, Meier demonstrated many of the points made by speakers with PowerPoint slides at the Grazing Conference. Large pastures are divided with fences into paddocks of high-quality grass. Cows are moved to fresh pasture every day, sometimes twice a day.

The Meier cows are mostly Holstein/Jersey crossbreds, a change from large Holsteins. Smaller cows make more efficient use of grass. The cows are synchronized in calving to start milking at the end of January. Stockpiled grass helps extend the grazing season into winter. Less baled hay is fed. Less feed is purchased. Meier is the sole worker.

The bus tours also stopped at Greenhaven Dairies, LLC, in Granby, Mo. Grant and Karryn Chadwick are sharemilkers on a 480-acre farm that has 740 cows divided into two milking herds. Their milking herds and farm is one of five Grasslands Dairies owned by New Zealanders near Grandby, Mo.

"We came from New Zealand to apply the best of what we knew," Grant Chadwick said. "But, we've learned Missouri is more extreme. The winters are colder and rainfall less reliable." The couple is working toward owning their own herd. Their farm has 4.5 employees.

The next stop was at Friend Heifer Ranch, in Aurora, Mo. Some 3,000 heifers are raised for the milking herds of the other Grasslands dairy farms. "We take the management stress and labor of raising heifers from the managers of the other farms," said Jock Fulton, operations manager for Grasslands LLC.

The heifers are raised, bred and returned to their home farm within two months of calving, at the age of 22 months. About 70 percent of the heifer diet is grass, however, corn silage increases dry matter intake of the growing calves. The heifers are synchronized for artificial insemination.

At the opening session, Tony Rickard, of Monett, Mo., University of Missouri Extension dairy specialist and co-host, said, "Until just over

three weeks ago, we thought we would be welcoming you to Joplin, Mo. But, that devastating tornado changed our plans."

Later in the conference, Rickard told how more dairy farmers are adding grazing to their feed sources on conventional dairy farms. Management-intensive rotational grazing systems help reduce feed costs.

Cost reduction becomes important as feed costs have risen and milk prices have dropped.

Opening day, Jay Waldvogel, vice president for international development at Dairy Farmers of America, told of a world of opportunity awaiting dairy producers.

"You have a product that consumers want," he said, referring to milk from grass-fed cattle.

As world populations gain more income, the first thing people want is high quality protein. They want milk and cheese. "The first thing a mother in a third-world country will buy with her first dollar is milk for her children."

Denis Turner spoke twice at the conference about raising dairy replacement heifers. Then he invited attendees to stop at his farm, Heifer Haven near Hartville, Mo., for a tour on their way home.

He contracts with other producers to give the intensive care needed to grow replacement heifers that will go back into their milking herds. "About 25 percent of a dairy farm budget is tied up in replacements," Turner said. "We want to improve the efficiency of that investment."

Turner changed his career in 1994-95 after cooperating in an on-farm rotational grazing demonstration organized by MU Extension specialists. He found a needed niche in heifer development.

With synchronized AI breeding, he develops a more uniform set of replacement heifers. The AI genetics from superior sires add value to the customers' milking herds.

All speakers told a common theme: the importance of management for increased growth.

Charles Fletcher, Purdy, Mo., described his forage measurement tools. A rising-plate meter calculates standing dry matter content in each of 52 grazing paddocks used to feed his 320-cow herd. The other part is a computer model on the MU Extension dairy grazing website that shows him a "grazing wedge" of the growth stage in each paddock.

"I used to run around on a four-wheeler looking at paddocks," he said. "Now the grazing wedge shows me which paddock is ready to graze next."

He turns his cows into a fresh paddock after each milking. "I can remember where the paddocks are, but can't remember the growth in each one."

All farm speakers remarked on the changes in their farm management after switching to dairy grazing.

Meier said the single biggest change he saw was on the face of his banker. "He lost that worried frown." △