

How I Make Grazing Work For My Jersey Herd

Darrell Carlton

Our dairy farm, Carlton Jersey Farm, consists of 120 acres of crop land of which we use 30 acres in the pasture rotations. The herd presently consists of 56 mature Jersey cows and 50 heifers with a rolling herd average of 16,000. My wife, Donnie, and myself are the sole managers of the operation. During the winter months, we feed our herd alfalfa hay, corn silage, and grain mix through the milking parlor and three computer feeders located near the freestall barn and milking parlor. During the grazing season, we use home-grown alfalfa hay along with the grazed forages. We graze mainly alfalfa and orchard grass pastures. When pastures run short, we supplement with additional alfalfa hay.

Prior to 1980, my relatives utilized brome-alfalfa pastures as night pastures during the summer. I reasoned that if this worked for them, grazing might work for our operation. Around 1980, we started grazing some of the old alfalfa stands. We saw that this was beneficial to our operation through increased milk production.

About 1982, we started strip grazing which further improved production and, more importantly, improved pasture utilization. Over the years, we have conducted some of field trials for various grazing varieties of alfalfa. We were the first farm in Kentucky to use 401Z-Amerigraze, an improved grazing variety of alfalfa.

Early in the grazing season (first 60 to 90 days) when the "grass" is growing more rapidly, we use six paddocks of about three acres each.

Cows are left on each paddock about three days resulting in 18 days between rotations. As the temperature increases and the growth rate of the alfalfa slows, we utilize some of our alfalfa hay land for grazing. Thus, in the hotter parts of the summer we may utilize over 10 different paddocks of about three acres each. Each paddock will be grazed for about two days with 21 to 22 days between grazing rotations. When alfalfa and grass become limiting, we feed alfalfa hay to supplement the pasture forage. Yes, it does cost money to establish the alfalfa-grass in the pastures but these costs are spread out over 6 years. When using pasture, it is important that each paddock have a convenient source of water and shade. It is our experience if cattle leave the pasture, they will not return to eat when it is hot outside. The closer the cows stay to the pasture they are grazing, the more they eat and the better they milk.

The bottom line for me is that grazing alfalfa improves our income over feed costs. During the spring, when "grass" is very lush we often times see an improvement in milk production. The cows tend to eat three pounds less grain when they are grazing, thus, resulting in more money in our pockets. Also, when we are very busy with field work, less time needs to be spent scraping the cow lot (less manure deposited on the lot) and feeding the cows.

In addition to the financial benefits, grazing improves the health of our cattle through less feet and leg problems with cattle off the

concrete more. We also have less displacements because they are eating more roughage and not overconsuming grain. We feel that we can control flies easier when less manure is left on the concrete lot.

Bloat can be a problem when grazing alfalfa but you just need to use some cow sense. Cows congregating under a shade tree can increase the incidence of mastitis. Also, we have found that we need to dedicate time to watch our cows for heat. We have found

that this is best done later in the evening when we are doing some other chores around the cows. Other than having to manage these potential problems, we feel that grazing alfalfa has definitely made us money and we plan on continuing to use grazing in our feeding and management program.