Why Graze?

BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, AND SOLUTIONS FOR PASTURE-BASED DAIRY MANAGEMENT

KELLOGG BIOLOGICAL STATION
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Goals of Research

- Complement other research at the Kellogg Biological Station by examining implementation of:
  - Pasture-based dairy management
  - Robotic milking technology

- Examine how these methods might support the sustainability of small and medium dairy producers in Michigan (< 300 cows)
Our Research Questions

1. What are the social benefits of pasture-based dairy management?
2. What are the challenges and drawbacks of adopting pasture-based dairy management?
3. What are the primary barriers to the adoption of pasture-based dairy management?
4. What approaches could be used to address current challenges and barriers?

Research Methods: Interviews

- 80 interviews:
  - 20 grazing/conventional
  - 20 grazing/robotic
  - 20 confinement/conventional
  - 20 confinement/robotic
- Semi-structured interview guide
- Transcript analysis
Motivations and Benefits

1. Sustainability
2. Lifestyle
3. Cost
4. Animal health

Sustainability

- More natural way to raise cows
  "I just like to see cows on grass."
  "This is farming we believe in."
  "We wouldn’t do it any other way."
- Less inputs
- Environmental concerns
- Health concerns (themselves and consumers)
Lifestyle

“Relaxed” lifestyle and schedule

“I think the other big thing of it is that it is a lifestyle decision because you spend more time handling the cattle this time of the year but it is a lot more hands off the other time of the year, and that is what I really like about it.”

“No, even if corn went to $10 we would still probably graze ...It just kind of a friendly environment and it is good for the cows and I don’t see that we will ever pull up all the pastures and ever go back.”

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Lifestyle

Less time in the barn and tractor

“Well I like that way, and hate the mornings when I have to be on the tractor and be on the fields.”

Healthier (walking, getting outside)

“I walk at least 5 miles every day and feel a lot better during the summer time than winter just getting out there and walking, {instead of} sitting in a tractor.”
Cost and Finances

- Reduced capital costs

  “I would have had to spend $80,000 on equipment, instead I spent $6,000 on fences and lanes.”

  “I think grazing could be a very good option for young farmers with new farmers getting into the business and if I could start over again that is what I would do.”

- Lower input costs

  “I’ve made money every year, even in 2009 when the milk price crashed and my neighbors were all selling out.”

Animal Health

“A cow’s attitude changes when she goes out on grass, so we see a lot of health benefits more than anything, from them being out, and even cows with sore feet will go out and they gimp all the way out.”

“to me you are not chasing as much as the veterinary issues from a health standpoint”

“I think it has helped the longevity of the herd too, because we have a couple older cows that might have washed out in a confinement situation so I think it helps prolong their lives a little bit.”
Barriers and Challenges

1. Production
2. Debt
3. Land base
4. Lack of information and support

Production and Debt

- Production = success
  
  "We are learning that money isn’t in production."

  "The hardest thing for an established high producing dairy farmer, the hurdle to get over is to walk away from all the principles that high production = high income. Which it doesn’t, but that was what our mentality was at the time."

- Pressures of debt
  
  "But some of these farms have a debt load. You know when you borrow $30 million, you have a debt load that you have to meet every month just to cover your interest costs."

  "The cash crops are too lucrative to think about replacing with cows."
Land Base

- Large, contiguous land is hard to find and afford

“Land base. You know, do you have it within your current facilities to walk your cows within a mile or less to that grass? If you don’t well you can’t do it anyway.”

“And we looked mainly at our land base. If we want to graze this land can only support this amount of cows and that amount of cows wasn’t going to be enough to farm commercial.”

“Yea there are a lot of guys wanting more and more land all the time.”

Lack of Information and Support

“I just didn’t know anything about it and once I did learn about it the challenge for me is where do you go to ask what is the next thing and what do we want to go to next?”

“There was just no one around doing this.”

- Discussion groups, field days
- Help with laying out paddocks
- Help with pasture management
Grazing Resources and Support

- KBS research
- MSU extension grazing

Grants
- NRCS
- SARE
- KBS

Non-traditional Marketing

- New skill set
  - Marketing
  - Working with customers
  - Designing products
- More control over your product
- Larger profit share
- Grazing premium
Thank you

- Kellogg Foundation
- Mat Haan
- MSU Extension and Dairy Educators
- Matthew McDermott
- Clare Maguire