

ROTATIONAL GRAZING

by Rich Redman, District Conservationist, USDA Natural Resources
Conservation District

Rotational Grazing is not a new concept. It has been used, and is being used, all over the world. It goes by other names like Voisen Rotational Grazing, and Controlled Grazing. Basically, it is pasturing cows on a different patch of ground every day. It can save farmers money and keep them in business.

Conventional pastures are typically large acreage fields. Cows are allowed to eat what they want, and all they want, until every blade of grass is grubbed down and only about a half an inch of growth is showing. Once the grass is gone, hay is brought to the cows, and farmers spend time and money raising corn or silage for their animals. The result is an up and down feed quality, up and down milk production, and an up and down milk paycheck.

Rotational grazing management is based on grass growth, feed needs and nutritional quality. A grazing plan is started by calculating the amount of feed the dairy herd will need for a day. Once that is known, the acreage is calculated to supply that amount. Roughly one acre is needed per day for a small herd of 25 cows. We then calculate how many days we will need for regrowth in the spring and in the hot summer periods in order to figure the total amount of grazing area required. The individual piece of land for a herd's daily needs is called a paddock. Paddocks are individually fenced with temporary electrified wire, with fenced lanes providing access to each paddock.

Cows are generally put into a new paddock at night, brought into the barn for morning milking, then put out to the same paddock to clean up what is left. After the evening milking, they are put into a new paddock where fresh and highly nutritious grass is waiting. This cycle is repeated until the first paddock's grass has reached the height to be grazed again. The management is in watching the grass height, and haying other paddocks when they need it.



The benefits of rotational grazing are numerous. There is high quality feed available for a low cost. Manure spreading is taken care of by the animals. Hired labor costs tend to be reduced as do barn electric bills, since the farmer has cows on a well managed pasture for five months.

Rotational grazing also brings great benefits to water quality. More cropland - which is generally plowed, manured, seeded, and sprayed with herbicides and pesticides for annual corn production - is put into permanent sod. Instead of free access to streams, the fenced rotational paddock usually contains a portable watering stock tank. (The farmer runs a valved plastic line to the paddocks for daily fresh watering of the cows.) When stream areas are within a paddock, electric wire and a single stone stream crossing will keep the cows from destroying streambank stability and vegetation. This type of crossing is beneficial to the cows; there tends to be less problems with mastitis since cows aren't dragging their udders through mud.

So far, five farmers in Essex County with herd sizes running from 40 to 175 cows, have switched to the rotational grazing system. It is not suitable for all farmers like those with rented land far from the barn, but my goal is to get half the farmers in the county on rotational grazing in a year or two.
