

# Rotational Grazing on Connecticut Dairy Farms

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In the past decade, many dairy farms have been returning to an older technology of grazing their animals for their feed rations. The technology of animal grazing has improved a greatly, with the introduction of management intensive rotational grazing (MIRG). Grazing addresses the problem of decreasing milk prices, not by increasing production like most technologies, but by decreasing the cost of production.

MIRG has a number of significant benefits to farmers: (i) it significantly lowers feed costs to farmers, (ii) it reduces the problems of manure storage, (iii) and is potentially healthier for the animals. However, this lower cost of production through grazing also comes with a lower production of milk.

Because grazing does not use a lot of cropping machinery, the technique, with its low start-up costs, has been popular with beginning dairy farmers in the Midwest. Some farmers have also liked the ability to include children in farming, moving fences and animals, that comes with grazing.

For the average Connecticut dairy, the key problem likely to be encountered is the lack of pasture access within a reasonable distance of the barn. Since many dairy farmers are renting parcels at great distances to get enough land, they may not be able to put enough land near the barn in a grazing rotation.

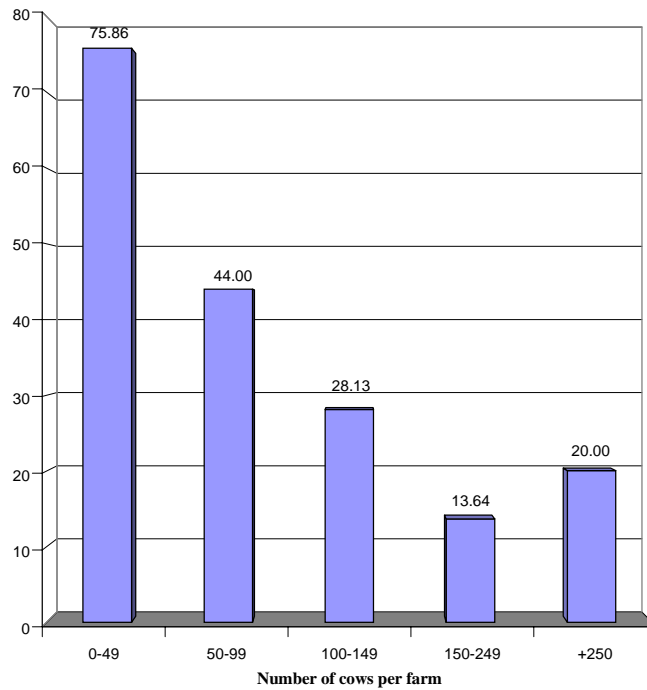
**Who is Grazing:** Table 1 shows that over one third of Connecticut dairy farmers graze their animals for at least part of the herd's forage rations with about 21% being "rotational grazers" in that they moved their animals to fresh pasture more than once a week. Three quarters of the farms relied on pastures for their heifers, dry cows, and/or calves.

**Table 1**

Grazing	Percent of Farms
Percent of farms relying on pastures for at least part of their forage ration	39.5
Percent of farms on which pastures are the primary source of total feed	18.9
Percent moving grazing cows to fresh pastures:	
Twice a day	4.0
Once a day	5.6
Every 2-3 days	5.6
Every 4-6 days	3.2
About once a week	2.4
Percent relying on pasture for the following animals:	
Heifers	74.3
Dry cows	73.9
Calves	29.8

As the chart on the next page shows, it is clearly the smaller farms in Connecticut that are grazing their dairy cattle. This is likely as much because of the logistics of grazing large herds as the availability of land for larger grazing operations.

Percent of farms that rely on pastures for their milking cows



### Productivity and Profitability of Grazing:

In general one would expect farms that primarily graze their animals to have lower productivity per cow but potentially higher profits. In the data from our survey, we find that milk production per cow on farms that graze their animals is essentially the same once one has controlled for other differences between the farms.

Farms that graze their animals also had about the same profit rate per cow as farms that did not graze their animals. There is some indication that farms using pasture as the primary source of feed for their dairy cattle, had higher profits, but this result is not statistically significant.

### Recommendations:

Grazing is going to be most profitable on farms with pasture near their barns and without large sums of money sunk into confinement systems (large barns, manure pits, major cropping machinery, etc.). While it has shown promise in other areas of the country, the potential for its expansion in the Connecticut dairy industry is small, primarily due to land constraints. On the other hand since a great number of farmers graze their heifers and dry cows, they may want to investigate improved grass technologies for grazing.