



# managed grazing for dairy profits

## Paris Family Dairy

*Written by Tom Cadwallader, Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship*

Bert and Trish Paris  
Belleville, Wisconsin

### Introduction

Bert and Trish Paris have been dairy farming on their farm near Belleville, Wisconsin for nearly 35 years. After about 10 years in business, they came to the conclusion that going the conventional route wasn't meeting their family and business goals. At that point they made the decision to transition their farm to a managed grazing system.

Family involvement in the dairy has always been an important part of the farm and much of the reason behind their decision to go grazing. When they first started the farm they were following the conventional confinement system pathway that many dairy farmers in Wisconsin were following: focusing on milk production and trying to do all of the cropping themselves. As their family continued to grow, eventually to two daughters and two sons, they were investing a tremendous amount of time and capital

equipment in trying to keep up with production demands. They felt like they were running just to keep up and were always concerned about the safety of their children on a farm using a system that needed more and more equipment to function.

At the same time they were getting started, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the grazing movement in Wisconsin was starting to take hold as a growing number of farmers were more aggressively questioning the direction dairy farming was heading. The grazing community in Southwest Wisconsin was a leader in sharing experiences in putting cattle back on grass and looking at more cost effective ways of milking. Bert and Trish were impressed by what they had seen and making the switch to grazing made economic sense to the Parises. Since Bert always enjoyed being with the dairy herd much more than running equipment, they were also very attracted to the less stressful system for both them and their animals.

From the beginning they have always tried to keep the management system simple and the farm to a size that

could easily be managed by the family, never depending much on outside labor.

## **Herd and milking**

The Paris's 80 cow crossbred, non-organic milking herd has been a spring seasonal calving herd for the last few years. With all of the children grown and gone onto other careers, the financial pressures haven't been as great and Bert has really enjoyed the time off they have when they dry up the herd each winter.

As of January 2018, besides the dairy herd, their livestock inventory has included 25 bred heifers and 25 open heifers. In a typical year they cull about 25% of the herd to make way for younger animals if it looks like they can improve the herd genetics. This makes the average age of the cows in the herd somewhere between 4 and 5 years. Any additional heifers are typically sold as breeding stock to other dairy farmers.

The Parises have focused on using smaller-framed genetics, with mature cows weighing between 1000 and 1100 pounds, to efficiently harvest forages through grazing. Bert provides a majority of the labor but does get help for milking and different farm chores from Trish, other family members, and some part time help when needed. In 2017 they shipped about 11,250 pounds of milk per cow. Their herd's average somatic cell count was around 220,000 while protein was at 3.4%, butter fat 3.8% and solids averaging around 12.5%. They have typically supplemented about 6 pounds of grain daily per cow to the milking herd during the grazing season and 4 pounds per head when they are finishing off their milking year in confinement. They haven't been using a TMR.

For milking, the Parises use a New Zealand style swing 10 parlor that they installed in 1997 after they got started in grazing. They milk twice a day with two people and only need about two hours a day to get the milking and cleanup done. For housing, when they aren't grazing, they have a combination of an overwintering area and a loose housing bedded pack barn that gets cleaned out once a year and is spread on acres that are to be cropped.

## **Pasture and land management**

Bert and Trish have kept their system very simple. Their total operation involves 220 acres. Their home farm is about 130 acres and is all devoted to grazing. They also farm an additional 90 acres of rented land that they use for cropping, primarily as forage.

Their grazing system is divided up into 22 permanent paddocks and they move the cattle to a new paddock after each milking. The rest period between grazings varies through the year but they try to give each paddock a 32 day rest period. Bert estimates that in most years they are able to get about 220 days of grazing, depending on the growing season.

The pastures tend to be composed of orchard grass, brome grass, reed canary grass and bluegrass for the grasses, and red and white clover for the legumes. They try to achieve a 30% legume stand and in order to do that they do use a no-till drill to do some interseeding. In the areas where they do some overwintering they seed down some orchard grass, brome grass and festulolium mixed in with turnips and cow peas; which provides some mid to late summer grazing.

To ease pressure on the home farm during the grazing season, they have been working with another grazer in the area who custom raises their youngstock. While it is an expense, it really eases up the labor and land requirements on the farm and provides them with some replacement heifers that easily blend into their operation when they freshen for the first time.

## **Marketing and financial management**

The Parises have focused on running a simple, labor-efficient grazing system. The cost and labor savings have provided them with the profitability that they needed for many years; however, things are changing in the dairy industry as production and product inventory has outstripped demand. Their low input system has allowed them to stay in the conventional market, but as milk prices stay low they are taking steps to transition to organic production. However, organic has not been immune to the oversupply of

milk in the US market so they are exploring the possibility of going to a grass only herd.

Feed costs have not been a major issue. With their spring seasonal herd, any purchased forages needed have been relatively low cost and they have been able to find good deals. The limited amount of purchased grain they have needed has generated plenty of additional milk income to cover the cost. However, transitioning to organic means feed costs will be rising, so they will be challenged with finding sources that deliver the quality and quantity they need.

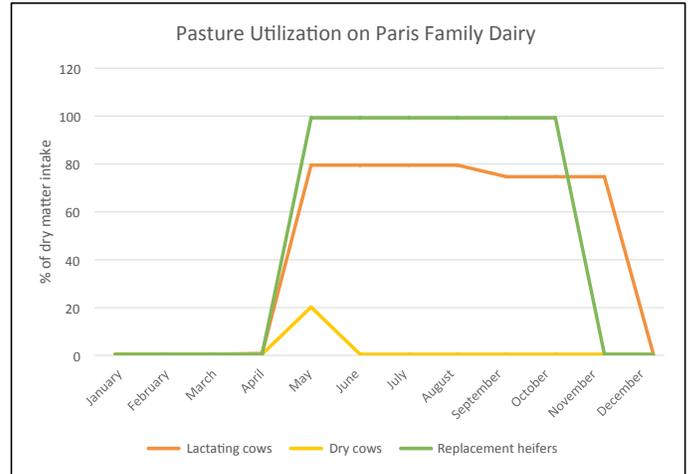
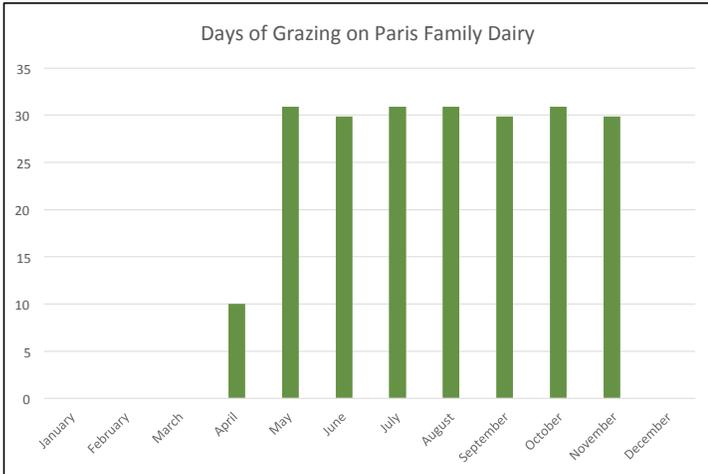
### Summary and key points

The Paris farm has been the quintessential management intensive grazing dairy that began evolving in the late 1980s-early 1990s. It has focused on low cost housing and milking systems and intensively managed grazing that cut down on the need for outside labor. It has eased back on production pressure on the dairy herd making it easier to handle more cows profitably and keep them in the herd longer. That has been the key to their success up until this point.

The Paris's daughter Meagan is expressing an interest in coming back to the farm, so they are considering options that will allow that to happen. As the dairy industry in the U.S. has continued to shift to fewer larger confinement dairies supplying more and more of the market demand, small dairies such as the Paris's that are looking at transitioning the farm to another generation need to find options that will generate enough cash flow to allow that to happen. The two most popular options being considered by many graziers are switching to organic or grass only milk. Both are viable options for farms such as the Paris's that have well established pastures and excellent management in place.

Feed high quality forages to moderately framed dairy cows that are selected for the ability to graze effectively and are easy keepers, has been the backbone of the Paris Dairy for the last 25 years. The Parises will continue to look for production and farm management tools to assure they can do it sustainably.

Monthly Grazing on the Paris Farm				
Month	Days of Grazing	% Dry Matter Intake (DMI) from Grazing		
		Lactating cows	Dry cows	Replacement heifers
January	0	0	0	0
February	0	0	0	0
March	0	0	0	0
April	10	0	0	0
May	31	40	20	100
June	30	80	(no more dry cows)	100
July	31	80	0	100
August	31	80	0	100
September	30	75	0	100
October	31	75	0	100
November	30	75	0	0
December	0	0	0	0



Testing Dairy Financial Risk through Grazing and Insurance. 2018. Midwest Perennial Forage Working Group, Green Lands Blue Waters. [www.greenlandsbluwaters.net/dairy.html](http://www.greenlandsbluwaters.net/dairy.html). Study conducted with funding from USDA-Risk Management Agency.

*This project was conducted by members of the Midwest Perennial Forage Working Group of Green Lands Blue Waters, with funding from USDA-Risk Management Agency.*

