

Making the Transition to Grazing, Part I

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I can still remember the first time I met Paul Bickford. It was at one of the first Wisconsin Grazing Conferences and he talked about his transition to grazing. In his all-or-nothing style, Paul had converted his 400 cow confinement system to a pasture based system the past summer. He said he had saved something like \$10,000 a month in feed costs by putting his cows out to pasture. At the time, he thought he was done making the transition. In reality, it was only the beginning. That was in 1992. Today, Paul and his wife Cyd milk over 600 cows on 1700 acres of pasture and cropland near Ridgeway in Iowa County. Over the years, he's gained some unique insights into one of the greatest hurdles to getting into grazing. How do you get started?

Shed your old mindset.

We've all heard about the steep learning curve in converting to a grazing system. It involves some very different skills than are needed for traditional dairy and livestock systems and, perhaps more importantly, requires a whole different mindset. Looking back on where he's come from, Paul has three general suggestions: 1) Open up your blinders; 2) Know your limitations; and 3) Don't go faster than you gain knowledge.

In other words, developing a successful grazing system requires 'thinking outside the box.' Each system is unique to the individual farm and operator. Success comes from utilizing existing resources to the best advantage and understanding the lay out of your farm. Make use of your unique skills. Don't build into your system things that you don't do well or aren't comfortable with. Make changes gradually as you learn new skills.

And remember, you WILL make mistakes. It's unavoidable. Today, there's a lot of information, resources, and technical assistance you can tap into, so maybe you can avoid some of the more obvious mistakes. But everyone will stumble—that's the way things work. Remember, your most important asset is that grey matter between your ears. The keys to success in grazing are ingenuity, flexibility, and creativity.

You can expect your neighbors to wonder if you've lost your mind (some days you'll even wonder if you've lost your mind). And if you're someone who's been a good crop farmer and likes a neat, tidy field, you're going to be dismayed at the messy, shaggy appearance of a pasture system. No one's farm is more public than Paul's with Hwy 18-151 running through the middle of it. He's heard a lot of comments and rumors over the years. You just learn to ignore them. The bottom line and your quality of life are what's important.

Will grazing work on my farm?

The short answer is 'Yes.' But the caveat is that there are ideal grazing farms and less than ideal grazing farms. You can make it work on your existing place, but some layouts are easier than others.

Paul's farm is nothing if it isn't challenging. With Hwy 18-151 cutting a swath through it, he struggled to get his milking herd to use the 300 foot tunnel that connected his milking facility with 160 acres of pasture across

the highway. It just didn't work, but he didn't give up. He just modified his system and now he uses that land for his heifers and young stock and for corn silage production. In other words, if you want to make it work, there's probably a way to do it!

It might be tempting to start fresh with a new farm, one that seems 'better suited' to grazing. That's a big risk. You might get something better and you might not. Staying put means making a transition in a familiar setting. You know the cropping history. You know where the ground stays wet and where it's droughty. You know where the cold wind blows in the winter. You and your cows know your milking setup. That's a few less unknowns to deal with. Maybe someday you'll want to look for your ideal grazing farm, but it'll be a few years before you gain the experience to know what to look for.

Inventory resources.

Fencing. Electric fencing has made modern grazing management possible. You'll need to put a lot in, but go slowly. Invest first in perimeter fencing and use less costly temporary fences for interior divisions. It'll be a few years before you've mastered the skill of matching your herd's needs with pasture growth. You'll need the flexibility to adjust paddock size. If you have existing perimeter fencing, you can use adaptors that hang on the old barbed wire to run an electric wire inside what's already there and run your temporary fence from that (whatever you do, do NOT electrify barbed wire).

Watering. A watering system is another major start-up expense, but this, too can be built gradually. Most people agree that milk production is improved when water is provided in each paddock, but this is not absolutely necessary. Fresh pasture contains much more moisture than dry hay. Many graziers simply provide water at the barn and the animals consume what they need at milking. Developing a watering system can take place over several years and there are many ways to go, from hauling water with a truck-mounted tank, to running above-ground lines (most common), to running buried lines. Watering from streams or ponds is another option, but requires more planning and attention.

Lanes. You'll need lanes for herd and equipment movement. Here's another area where you can spend a lot or a little and it's worthwhile to go slow. Paul's built some lanes that looked convenient and sensible to him, but didn't turn out that way. A straight line may be the shortest distance between two points, but if it goes straight up a hill, expect your herd to spend as much time getting up the hill as they do grazing once they get to the top of the hill. Watching your herd and how they move across the landscape will give you some clues as to how to lay out effective lanes.

If you're going to run equipment on your lanes, make sure they're wide enough and durable enough to serve this purpose. Designing your fencing, watering, and lane system is an art and a science. Go and look at how other graziers have done things, host a pasture walk and get some ideas from others. Assistance is also available through the Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (GLCI). Contact your local NRCS office or Grazing Specialist Brian Pillsbury at 608/355-4470. Another good source of information is the UW Extension Forage Team Website: www.uwrf.edu/grazing.

Existing pasture. If you have any amount of existing pasture, you're in luck. Even if it's only ten acres and looks like a pool table, do not assume that your existing pasture is worthless and needs to be replaced with 'improved varieties.' Work with what you've got to start with. Start by doing a soil test and fertilize to correct nutrient deficiencies. Apply some nitrogen fertilizer (50 lb actual N at a time, total of 150 lb/season) and see what happens. Give that pasture time to rest and regrow between grazings. When it's incorporated into a grazing rotation you'd be amazed at how much more productive an old 'native' pasture can be.

So those are your resources at hand. The next step is actually planning the transition. It's helpful to get an aerial photo and start laying out your system. You'll need to answer a lot of questions. How many acres of

pasture will you need? How will you lay them out? How will you manage your herd? Stay tuned! Next month we'll cover these topics and more!

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