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## **Successes and Failures: It's All About Learning**

*by Laura Paine, Crops and Soils Agent*

At our recent Columbia County Graziers winter meeting, 6 experienced graziers from around Wisconsin talked about their 3 worst mistakes and their 3 best ideas. It's easy to share our successes—we can rightfully take pride in them. But it takes a little courage to talk about our failures. Candidness has always been a trait that I've admired in graziers. Sharing failures as well as triumphs is a gift to other graziers.

Among the panel there was probably 100 years of grazing experience. By the time we finished, Altfred Krusenbaum, Bert Paris, Dan Patenaude, Ron Reihl, Dick Ryan, and Harley Troester had covered the spectrum from acidosis to overwintering. In the process, they've given us some keys to successful grazing.

Although their rankings varied among the speakers, the tips can be grouped into 5 general categories: pasture management, herd health, breeds and breeding, infrastructure, and quality of life. Let's go through them one by one and see what we can learn from them.

### **Pasture Management**

Pasture management was an important topic of both worst mistakes and best ideas. We all make mistakes as we learn how the grasses grow and what they need—remember the animals are just a tool to manage the grass! Nearly all the panelists admitted to grazing too short and not allowing long enough rest periods as they were getting started.

Several panelists reinforced the basic managed grazing tenet of working with what you've got. In a low input system, you've got to get out of the mind set of spending money on a quick fix. Buying into the new fad varieties as they come out will not serve you well in the long-run or the short run. Ron said it best: plant nothing but posts the first three years. See what your management inputs will do before you invest in reseeding.

Bert has focused a lot on building pasture productivity and organic matter and one of his mistakes was thinking that he could save money by skimping on nitrogen fertilizer when converting with row crop ground to pasture. In his experience, the fastest way to rebuild organic matter and fertility was to grow a lot of biomass with the help of nitrogen fertilizer.

One of his best ideas was implementing his overwintering and fallowing system. He sets up round bales in one or two paddocks each winter and feeds his herd there all winter. The next summer, those paddocks are allowed to rest (fallowed) for several months until July or August. At that point, the grass is headed out and rank. He grazes it with low nutritional need animals and allows them to trample a lot of the forage.

A waste? Not in Bert's experience. The following year and for several years after, these paddocks are by far the most productive on his farm. The addition of fertility from manure, the long rest period, the return of a large amount of

biomass builds organic matter and healthy root systems. Bert's found that the short term loss of production from the fallowed paddock is more than offset by the long term gains.

### Herd Health

Herd health issues fell into both worst mistakes and best ideas, depending on whether the producer made the discovery before or after the train wreck. Alfrid described his battle with subacute acidosis. Once he was aware of the problem, he made the mistake of trying to cure it in his dairy herd using corn silage as a carrier for grain. That only made it worse. So, while several panelists had found corn silage to be a useful supplement in their system, it was a mistake for Alfrid. He now uses haylage and has virtually eliminated acidosis.

Ron described a situation in which he and his vet misdiagnosed a case of lung worm as pneumonia with fairly disastrous consequences. This can happen to anyone and Dan had the common sense suggestion that we shouldn't expect our vets to perform miracles for us. We need to be good diagnosticians of our animals' problems. And, as Dick said, it's a good idea to have a preventive herd health program in place before the first animal arrives!

### Breeds and Breeding

On selecting breeds, we had a wide range of opinions, but Dan's comment that genetics DOES matter seemed to sum things up. You don't want to be so desperate that you'll settle for any genetics just to get the cows bred. Sometimes switching breeds altogether is necessary. Harley finally was able to achieve a seasonal milking calendar when he gave up on Holsteins and started milking Jerseys. The panel seemed to have a clear understanding of the limitation of Wisconsin's most common breed. Dick related how trying to graze confinement raised Holstein steers isn't worth the trouble. They just don't get it.

### Infrastructure

A lot of the discussion centered on how NOT to do infrastructure. All the panelists agreed that you shouldn't skimp on fencing materials. When it comes to fencing and watering equipment, you get what you pay for when you buy the cheap stuff. You'll just end up replacing it with the good stuff, very likely sooner rather than later. Harley echoed a sentiment that I've heard from several other graziers: do not put up permanent interior fences right away. Harley decided that he'd go with 2.5 acre paddocks, because that seemed about right for his herd at the time. He quickly found out that that doesn't work even over the course of a single season, let alone when you change herd size. And while permanent fencing is not a good idea for interior divisions, Alfrid learned that a good strong perimeter fence is worth the investment.

Several of the dairy farmers on the panel voiced the sentiment that they never regretted investing in well-constructed lanes (especially since there's often cost-sharing available). And while they were investing in grazing infrastructure, several panelists felt that getting rid of the infrastructure of their old conventional system—the tractors, haybines, row crop equipment—was very worthwhile. Many graziers find that they can hire work done or purchase grain or silage cheaper than they can make it. On the other hand, that depends on where you're located and what's available in your area. Harley related some bad experiences he's had having silage custom made. Make sure you've got a dependable custom operator before you sell your equipment!

### Quality of Life

Finally, many of the 'best ideas' were items that contributed to quality of life. That's what it's all about, isn't it? The whole point of converting to a managed grazing system is to capture some of those quality of life items. It might be worth investing a little more simply to make life more pleasant. One piece of infrastructure that several panelists felt was worth the expense was an enclosed tractor. It gets cold out there in the winter and sometimes it's worth it to invest in a little bit of comfort. Dan related his progression from an old open tractor in his ultra-low input days, to one with a cab with no doors, to his current enclosed cab with a working heater even!

The same can be said for a milking parlor, only more so. The process of bending and squatting beside 50 to 100 cows twice a day in a traditional stall barn can shorten a person's dairying career considerably. It's worth it to be good to your body—it's the only one you're going to get!

Overall, the 6 graziers covered the spectrum and we all learned a lot. They even learned things from each other. A highly successful sessions that I hope to repeat soon!

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