

A teaching schedule for dairy farmers . . . and other fun things to do without chores

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Many dairy farmers have a hard time finding a few days off, let alone entertaining the notion of being relieved from daily chores for two months. Dr. Zartman, a dairy specialist with the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Centre of the Ohio State University, has been promoting a seasonal dairying system that allows dairy farmers to enjoy this privilege for the two-month season of their choice, year in and year out. He outlined the seasonal dairying system at the Sustainable Agriculture Symposium, Reducing me Non-renewables, at the Nova Scotia Agricultural College last April.

Dr. Zartman has been conducting research near Canfield, Ohio, based on the following annual schedule for a herd of about 30 milking cows:

- a) the cows are due to freshen by March 15 (the majority freshen within four weeks but all freshen within eight weeks of this date);
- b) on April 6, all cows begin intensive rotational grazing (30 cows moved to a new 0.3 ha paddock each day);
- c) the mid-point of the eight-week breeding period is June 15;
- d) all cows are taken off pasture on Dec. 1; and
- e) all the cows are turned dry on Dec. 20 (just in time for the researchers to enjoy more holiday time).

The planned lactation period is 280 days and the cows freshen as the grazing season starts, to take advantage of the season's abundant high-quality forage. The planned dry period, during the coldest months, is 85 days, when cows must simply be fed and watered. They were housed in a pole barn during this period.

The advantages of seasonal grazing were enthusiastically listed by Dr. Zartman. The most important benefits may be improved herd health and the 100% conception rate. It was wryly explained that "the dormitory effect" or self-synchronization of the herd resulted in an 84% first-service conception rate and furthermore, 98% of the herd was "in cad" within the eight-week breeding window. Calves are not so afflicted with health problems, probably as a result of the cad hutches being clean and vacant for ten months.

It is more efficient to feed one ration rather than four or more rations when cows are at different stages of lactation. Since the cows are outside for most of the lactation period, bedding costs are much lower. Utility bills can be reduced by not using hydra and water for milking during the coldest winter weeks.

Responsibilities can be partitioned to eight-week periods such that breeding, night checks, feeding calves, etc., do not have to be done the rest of the year with the consequence of fewer mistakes due to a farmer's concentration on a specific activity for a limited period of time. Seasonal milking forces a 12-month milking interval compared to the industry average of 13.5 months.

Dr. Zartman acknowledged the many objections to seasonal dairying that are often raised. At the NSAC symposium, several farmers flatly stated that seasonal dairying could never be implemented in Canada, because of the supply managed milk system with its attendant quotas. Dr. Zartman was optimistic, however, replying that the Canadian market infrastructure might accommodate seasonal dairying if only a limited number of farmers with a specific amount of

quota were allowed to have their cows lactating within a given period. Dairy producers have different times that they might prefer to be free of milking chores; those with a maple sugar bush might want to have the cows dry in March and April, others might want to travel in July and August when dry cows could easily be fed by someone else. If most farmers prefer the same period, a pricing system could be implemented to reward those who schedule their lactation period at less preferable times.

Objections are also raised by farmers over not using barns and milking equipment, which represent high investments. Through proper management, there can be just as many cow-days of milking in a seasonal dairying system with a forced 12 month milking interval compared to a year-round system with a 13.5 month milking interval. It was also suggested that the investment would not deteriorate over two months and that this period could be an opportunity to update or repair equipment, resulting in long-term savings. Conversely, the large volume of milk once all cows freshen within a short period could mean the purchase of a larger bulk tank; however, a more economical alternative could be to arrange for every day pick-up during the peak flow period.

Managing all the calves at one time may seem like "stress made-to-order." Dr. Zartman argued that pens are not required for different age groups and after weaning, the calves can be managed as one group. He agrees that there will be a few busy weeks but dairy farmers can focus their attention on this task as do sheep farmers during lambing.

The disruption of cash flow is another problem that could be of concern to those who have adapted to a regular milk cheque. In the classic sense of turning a problem into an opportunity, Dr. Zartman considers this situation to be ideal for co-ops that provide financial services to farmers. The co-op could offer the service of investing the largest cheques and providing a monthly cheque when the cows are dry. Coops could also help

to arrange who ships how much milk during each month of the year. It might help coops to make money and keep members.

While teachers use a ten-week break to get out of school, dairy farmers might use it as an opportunity to get into school to upgrade their education and skills. Agricultural schools could also benefit from courses for practicing farmers. It would keep faculty up-to-date with the current ideas and concerns of farmers.

Seasonal dairying is common for 95% of the dairy herds in New Zealand, the home of intensive grazing. The two systems don't necessarily go together, but both have the potential to optimize the efficiency of agricultural production in Canada. Earlier in this century, co-operatively operated local cheese factories offered some flexibility for dairy farmers; their value may become more apparent again as Canadian dairy farmers have to compete in a tough global economy. Seasonal dairying might be a re-discovered complement as a niche marketing opportunity outside the increasingly monopolistic state of modern day, industrial milk processing.

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