



managed grazing for dairy profits

Law-Rae Manor Dairy

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David & Susan Surprenant
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Introduction

Law-Rae Manor Dairy is located in Kankakee County in northeast Illinois. The Surprenant family has been in Kankakee County since their French Canadian ancestors settled here in the 1840's. This area is now facing pressures from southward expansion of the Chicago metropolitan area and increasing conversion of farmland to housing or industry.

David bought the dairy in 1977. David's father died in 1992. In 1993, David and his wife Susan converted the dairy to grazing. They went to grazing because they weren't making any money with the confinement dairy they had operated up to that point. They had a great rolling herd average, but weren't making any profit. Grazing has enabled them to be profitable. The Surprenants have two sons that help part-time with the dairy.

Herd and milking

The dairy has 165 head of milking Holstein cows with the average cow weight of 1,280 pounds. The average age of cows in the herd is five years old. They have a rolling herd average of 15,267 pounds of milk per cow per year. The herd's average for butterfat is 4.0%, and for protein is 3.4%.

They do two milkings per day in a 20-stall pit parlor. The milkings take a total of about 5 hours per day with one operator needed per milking. Cattle are out on pasture as much as possible so they can spread their own manure at all times of the year. They are only confined for brief periods when weather is bad. Lactating cows are supplemented with 15 pounds of grain. A total mixed ration (TMR) is used and fed both when the cows are on pasture and when they are in confinement.

The cattle are housed in a free-stall building in inclement weather. Calving is done twice a year typically in the spring and in the fall.

Pasture and land management

The Surprenants own 340 acres and rent an additional 75 acres to make a total of 415 acres in their dairy farming operation. There are approximately 170 acres in grains (corn, wheat) and oilseeds (soybeans), 80 acres in hay (alfalfa), 155 acres in pasture, and 10 acres in lots and homesteads. Their soil is a fertile, dark prairie type soil.

The dairy's 155-acre pasture is divided into 40 paddocks. The paddocks are rotated every day and then rested for an average of 32 days. Their grazing season is typically nine months or 270 days. During periods of low or no rainfall, the Surprenants can irrigate this pasture with a full-circle center pivot. They are very fortunate to have a dependable supply of groundwater that is within 40 feet of the surface.

The composition of the pasture is a grass-legume mix. The grasses are a four-way blend of bluegrass, orchardgrass, perennial ryegrass, and endophyte-free tall fescue. The legume is ladino clover. For pasture renovation, David frost seeds ladino clover in areas needing more forage plants.

Law-Rae uses some annual forage in their forage chain. Their program consists of forage sorghum following the wheat crop. The sorghum is chopped for silage. If necessary, the winter wheat can be used for supplemental winter grazing.

Marketing and financial management

Law-Rae Manor Dairy sells milk on the conventional market. For the past 22 years it has depended on the management strategy of using intensive forage grazing coupled with maintaining a low debt to asset ratio to produce a high quality, low cost per hundredweight milk. David says that management intensive grazing has allowed him to be a successful dairyman in an area with only one outlet for its milk production.

Labor is supplied by David as the only full-time employee. The balance of the labor is part-time and that is divided between a hired man and his two sons.

The farm produces all its own forage. It is necessary for the dairy to purchase additional corn, along with distillers dried grains and mineral supplements to round out their TMR.

The Surprenants bought a second, 140-acre farm nearby and determined the milk from cows grazed on their original farm would cover the loan payment on the new farm. In order to ensure there would always be sufficient grass to keep the cows milking, they purchased an irrigation system. They viewed that system as their insurance policy to make sure they could always make the farm payment. It was an expensive purchase, but one of the best decisions they've made.

The future of the Law-Rae Manor dairy is at a crossroads not because of low milk prices, but because of the pressures of encroaching urban development and having access to only one market for their milk. This is forcing the Surprenants to reevaluate the future of their dairy and look at their possible options.

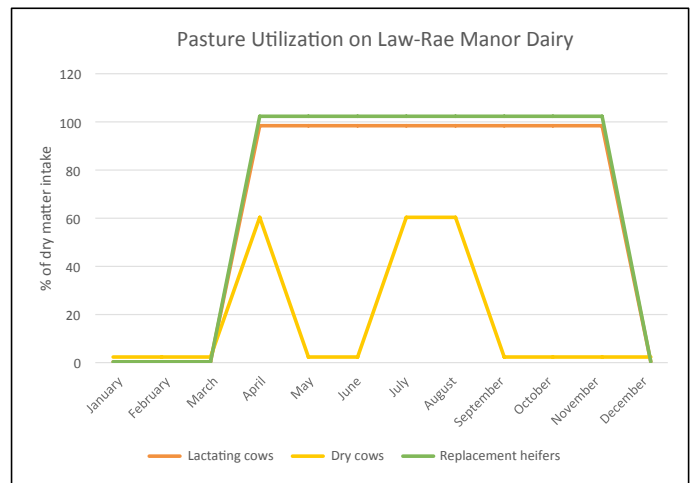
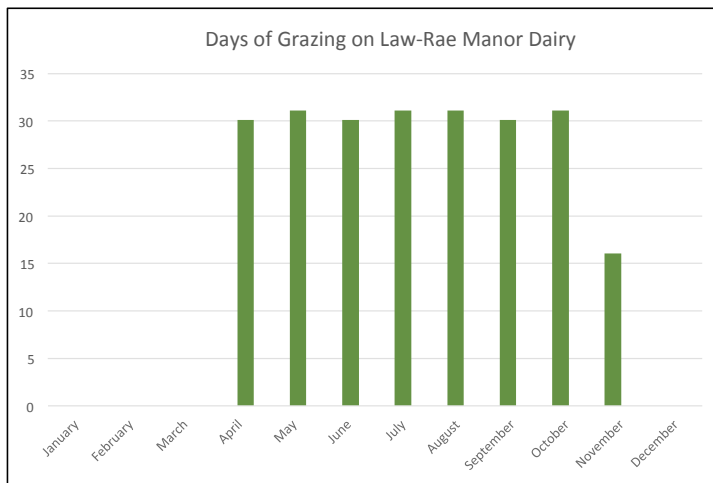
Summary and key points

David and Susan Surprenant are firm believers in management intensive grazing (MIG) and have been doing it since 1993 at their Law-Rae Manor Dairy. David says that MIG has allowed them to be a profitable 165-cow dairy for the past 23 years. In addition, the Surprenants have tried to keep their debt to asset ratio as low as possible. As David puts it, "We do not have the newest equipment, but it's all well maintained and if it needs to be replaced, we replace it." The dairy is blessed to be located on fertile, dark soils with a dependable groundwater supply within 40 feet of the surface.

While the Surprenants no longer use PRF insurance, they do believe in managing their forage production risk by installing and using irrigation on their pasture. The combination of intensive grazing management along with the option to use irrigation when needed, allows them to maintain a high-quality pasture for their cows throughout their nine-month grazing season.

Monthly Grazing on Law-Rae Manor 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	30	100	60	100
May	31	100	0	100
June	30	100	0	100
July	31	100	60	100
August	31	100	60	100
September	30	100	0	100
October	31	100	0	100
November	16	80	0	100
December	0	0	0	0



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

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